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VELVET FOOT, THE INDIAN DETECTIVE; or, THE TAOS TIGER.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,

AUTHOR OF "PLUCKY PHIL," "ARKANSAW," "BILL BRAVO," "CAPTAIN APOLLO," "CAPTAIN BULLET," "OLD FROSTY," ETC., ETC.



"THAR!" HE SAID, STRAIGHTENING AGAIN AND FACING THE ASTONISHED CROWD. "THAR'S MY NAME, GENTLEMEN!"

Velvet Foot,

THE INDIAN DETECTIVE;

OR,
THE TAOS TIGER.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,
AUTHOR OF "BILL BRAVO," "CAPTAIN BULLET,"
"BIG BENSON," "JUDGE LYNCH, JR.,"
"ARKANSAW," "BUCKSKIN DETECTIVE," "COOL SAM
AND PARD," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

DEAD LINE CITY INSULTED.

"NOBODY in Dead Line will ever claim that insultin' letter. It's an open slur on ther town, an' the person what writ it hed better never show himself hyer!"

The man who spoke thus, was one of a crowd of rough-looking fellows who had congregated in front of the post-office of Dead Line City, a famous place on the southern borders of Colorado, and deep in the mountains that extend into New Mexico.

The cause of his remarks, which were spoken in bad humor and to the flashings of a pair of deep black eyes, was a letter which had just arrived in the monthly mail from the South.

The postmaster had placed it in the window, in order to render it more conspicuous, and in hopes, no doubt, of finding a claimant.

From the very first that letter had excited curiosity and drawn a crowd.

Nobody wanted it, and why?

Simply because, instead of being addressed to some particular person, the superscription read as follows:

"To the Ugliest Galoot in Dead Line."

These words were what made the innocent-looking letter insulting; not that the Dead Liners prided themselves on any particular amount of beauty, but the whole crowd had voted it a slur, because it had evidently been so addressed out of spite.

"Hang me ef I wouldn't like ter know what's inside," exclaimed a member of the crowd.

"Claim 'er then."

"Not much. It's not addressed ter me. I guess Clover Phil will hev ter open it himself."

Clover Phil was the person who had the honor of being postmaster of Dead Line.

"Who said that that letter fits me?" and Clover Phil appeared at the door to the astonishment of the crowd. "Thar's twenty men in Dead Line that beat me for bad looks. I could throw that letter among ye an' hit a dozen now."

"Try it, Clover!" bantered a big broad-shouldered ruffian who wore a crimson scar across one of his bronze cheeks. "Toss 'er this way an' we'll solve ther mystery."

"Do you claim it?"

"Me! not much! Do you claim, Clover Phil, thet that insultin' letter b'longs ter me?"

Red Scar Dave ground his teeth behind the last word and took a menacing step toward the postmaster.

"Don't squirm till ye'r tramped on," answered Clover Phil, coolly eying the mad tough. "I insinuated nothin', but thar's ther letter. The man what says it b'longs ter him shall hev it."

The crowd set up a laugh at Dave's expense, and he glanced tigerishly at the letter in the window as if he longed to tear it to pieces.

"In the first place, it war mean ter send such a letter hyer," he growled.

"We all admit thet, Dave—"

"An' secondly it warn't fair ter post it up thar whar strangers kin see it."

"Why not?"

"It gives 'em a bad opinion ov Dead Line City. I say, hyer, thet I kin whip the whelp what sent thet letter; I kin thrash ther ground with his anatomy, an' ef he comes ter Dead Line, I'll fight him with his own weapons. Ther city's been grossly insulted. 'Ther ugliest galoot in Dead Line?' Thar's no such man hyer. I'm for hangin' the person what applies for thet dockermint!"

Red Scar Dave's last sentence was received with a cheer by his companions.

"We'll shed every drop ov blood in this crowd ter avenge any insult ter Dead Line!" the scarred ruffian proceeded. "Let a human being claim thet letter if he dares! Life's precious even in this kentry; but the hand what takes it from ther window shall drop lifeless at 'ts owner's side!"

All this time the letter in the window seemed to smile at the ill humored crowd that contemplated it.

The very letters appeared to possess a derisive grin as if they had accomplished the mission on which they had been sent to Dead Line.

"You'll report ter us ef thet insult is called for?" suddenly said Dave wheeling upon the postmaster.

"I will, but I don't expect to see it claimed by a Dead Liner."

"Ov course not."

"Do you really mean to say that you will hang the man that claims it?"

"We mean nothin' else!"

"It might be claimed by somebody just in sport."

"No difference! It's hangin' all the same!"

The crowd drew off, cursing the letter and its unknown sender, and its members separated in different parts of the border town.

Clover Phil went back into the little post-office and took down the objectionable letter.

"I'd like ter know what it means myself," he murmured, as he turned it over and over in his hands and held it up to the light, in hopes that his eyes could penetrate to its secrets. "It may be intended for a huge joke. If it is, it doesn't strike the boys. We don't take ter jokes in Dead Line. I half b'lieve with Dave thet this letter war written for a mean insult. Ther writer knew nobody hyer'd claim it. He'd better keep his distance. Dead Line's no baby town; it's more ov a devil's den."

Clover Phil finally restored the letter to its place in the window, no wiser than when he took it down, and turned away with a wistful glance which threatened to get the better of his curiosity if it was not soon claimed.

Five minutes later a man drew rein in front of the post-office, and with a smile leaned forward and read, in audible tones, the superscription on the rejected letter.

He bestrode an elegant horse, black as the midnight shroud, and he matched the animal well.

Large, well limbed and handsome, with a swarthy, almost Mexican face, piercing black eyes, and long hair that fell over his shoulders, he would have attracted attention anywhere.

He had just entered Dead Line, for there was dust on his high top-boots, and his horse looked like an animal that had galloped far since sunrise.

The day was waning fast, but there was enough light left to show the new-comer the legend on the irritating letter in the window.

"To the ugliest galoot in Dead Line, eh?" he suddenly laughed in a ringing voice that held spellbound the man on the inside. "Hello, Clover Phil! Can't you deliver this letter?"

In response to these words Clover Phil appeared in the doorway.

"Nobody wants it, it seems," he said.

"I'll take it," was the response.

"You?"

"Why not? Or perhaps nobody not a citizen ov this saints' rest will be allowed to claim it?"

"Thar's no restrictions, I b'lieve, but—"

"Toss it over, then!"

The postmaster of Dead Line City hesitated.

"Don't you want me to have it?" asked the mounted man, fixing his black eyes on Clover Phil.

"If you insist—"

"By heavens! I insist!" was the interruption. "I claim thet letter. I freely acknowledge thet I'm ther ugliest galoot in Dead Line, at this writin'. Give me my mail!"

A significant glance passed between the two men as Clover Phil stepped back and took the objectionable letter from the window.

"Hyar it is," he said reappearing with the letter between his fingers. "I don't pretend ter know what's on the inside. It's stirred up the Dead Line tigers, thet I know. I never saw 'em so riled before. My opinion is thet it would be safer fer you ter open this letter out ov town."

"Your opinion?" echoed the stranger. "Do you charge anything for it?"

"Not a red!"

"Good! I've struck one liberal soul in Dead Line. Now, why had I best read this letter out o' town?"

"Because the boys hev determined ter hang the man what claimed it."

A defiant twinkle made the eyes of the stranger dance.

"Whar ar' the boys?" he asked. "I want ter see yer crowd."

Clover Phil threw a quick glance over the horse, for not far away stood a crowd of twenty men anxiously regarding the stranger.

"Thet's ther party, eh?" cried the claimant

looking at the group, and the next moment he rose in his broad stirrups and held the letter above his head.

"I claim this document!" he exclaimed, shaking the still sealed letter. "Thar warn't a galoot in yer whole town brave enough ter ask fer it. I understand that ye'r goin' ter noose ther man what should lay claim ter it. I'm yer victim, men ov Dead Line. Why don't you come forward an' proceed with yer hangin'?"

Foremost in the crowd stood Red Scar Dave who a few minutes before was so eager to avenge the "insult" that had been offered the city, but he did not advance a single step.

"Twenty against one an' the twenty lacks sand!" continued the stranger with a laugh. "When I come ag'in I'll find ye in a hangin' humor, mebbe. This letter may belong ter me, after all. I'll leave my name on ther window for yer information."

Dropping back in the saddle, he leaned toward the window and selecting a certain pane at a glance, he wrote hastily across it for a moment with a diamond ring that glittered on one of his fingers.

"Thar!" he said, straightening again and facing the astonished crowd. "Thar's my name, gentlemen. I b'long ter the Tacs menagerie an' I'm the biggest tiger ov ther boss cage! Fare thee well, but not forever! I talk ov makin' Dead Line my head quarters for a spell. Good-night, my mountain lynchers!"

A moment later the man was riding like wildfire down the main thoroughfare of Dead Line City, and the crowd of roughs were gazing after him in speechless amazement.

All at once Red Scar Dave bounded toward the post-office, and when he halted in front of the window he had the whole gang at his back.

"Thar's his name, sure enough!" exclaimed Dave. "He's writ it in thet glass ter stay!"

Yes, cut into the pane by the keen diamond of the stranger was a name whose very brevity seemed to possess a terrible meaning.

"Captain Clutch!"

The Dead Liners stared at it without a word, until Clover Phil broke the silence.

"Will we ever hang that galoot, boys?" he asked.

"Yes! if it takes ever inch ov rope in Dead Line!" grated Red Scar Dave. "Cap'n Clutch! I don't know 'im, but thet makes no difference. He's got ter swing!"

Scarcely had the last words left the speaker's lips ere the rapid gallop of a horse was heard, and a minute later a man drew rein in the very center of the crowd.

What a contrast there was between Captain Clutch and this person.

His face was a dark copper color, his hair an ornamented scalp-lock; he was entirely naked to the waist.

"Great heavens!" ejaculated Red Scar Dave under his breath. "On whose trail is that red detective now?"

CHAPTER II.

THE COMANCHE'S REVELATION.

THE Indian who had appeared so suddenly among the mountain ruffians was no stranger in Dead Line City.

Time and again he had made his appearance in town, and always apparently on a mission.

It was known that the Comanche nation never possessed a more persistent tracker, that it never had within its borders a keener Indian than Velvet Foot, the very one who looked down from his horse into the dark faces of the Dead Liners before the shanty post-office.

Rumor had it that Velvet Foot was in the employ of the Government as a detective to ferret out, and run down a band of men who had infested the Colorado-New Mexican stage-routes until they had terrorized a great scope of country with their stern "stand-and-delivers."

There were men ready to laugh at the opinion that the Comanche was a Government detective, and those were the fellows who said that Velvet Foot was a thief himself, a copper-colored rascal who ought to be pistoled on sight.

Yet it was observed that they never attempted to act upon their own suggestion, and that the Comanche had no hand lifted against him, although he gave the detractors ample opportunity to pick him off.

There was one peculiarity about the Comanche which had not failed to attract attention: he never appeared twice at one place on the same horse.

To day he would be mounted on a splendid stallion with fire in his eyes and the speed of the wind in his limbs, and to-morrow he might appear astride a lazy burro that could hardly be coaxed out of a snail's pace.

When questioned about his change of horses, as he often was, Velvet Foot would invariably answer with a sly twinkle, that "white man" was a "good trader," and nothing more on the same subject was ever got from him.

Such a character, not a little mysterious and somewhat of a red enigma, was the half-naked Comanche who, on the occasion that introduces him to the reader, was mounted on a good looking five-year-old, almost black, with a close cropped mane and, from all appearances, a good runner.

"By Jove! you've come too late, Comanche," said Clover Phil. "We've just parted company with a reg'lar character. Thar's his trade-mark on the window yonder. Can ye make it out?"

Velvet Foot's eye followed the direction indicated by the postmaster's finger, and suddenly caught sight of the name scrawled on the glass.

"Who cut it?" was the sententious question that parted his lips as he glanced at the expectant crowd.

"Doesn't it tell you?"

"Velvet Foot can't read white man's silent lingo."

"Oh, you can't? Wal, That's the name ov Cap'n Clutch. Heard ov 'im, eh?"

If Velvet Foot had ever heard the name of the man from Taos he did not betray himself; his countenance was perfectly immobile, and his eyes told nothing.

"You kin fool some people, Ingin, but trump my best hand! ef I'm in that catalogue," muttered Red Scar Dave. "I've watched that face ov yours too long to be fooled now. When it looks that way it tells me suthin'. You know Cap'n Clutch an' you've got to tell me who he is."

Just then Dave happened to catch the Indian's eye, and giving him a look that was full of meaning, he moved away, certain that he had aroused the Comanche's curiosity enough to cause him to follow.

Nor was Red Scar Dave mistaken, for five minutes later, while he waited in the shadow of a shanty, the red-skin came up.

"Couldn't keep back, ha?" grinned the Dead Liner. "Give me an Injun for wantin' ter know suthin' every time."

With the noiseless movements of the panther Velvet Foot slid from his horse and alighted at Dave's feet.

"What white man's wink mean?" asked the Comanche. "Velvet Foot is here."

"So I see," and Red Scar looked the red-skin over from head to foot. "I'm hyer ter talk about Cap'n Clutch. You know every thing, Comanche, at least they say you do. You couldn't fool me with yer face while you looked at ther name thet Taos galoot cut inter Clover Phil's glass. I'm a close student ov human nature, reddy, an' ther moment I saw yer eyes strike thet name, thet moment I knowed you hed heard of it afore. I don't just know thet boss tiger ov ther Taos menagerie, but by thunder! if he shows up hyer ag'in, we'll become acquainted. Who is he, anyhow?"

"Was it to say this that Red Scar's eye summoned Velvet Foot hither?" was the Indian's answer as he stepped back, a look of disgust on his features.

"Mebbe it war an' mebbe it warn't," returned the Dead Liner. "Ef my question trespassed on one ov them secrets ye pretend ter carry around, you needn't auswer. But I know this: thet Cap'n Clutch is not unknown to you. Mebbe, by George! you ar' pards!"

Instantly a flash of resentment lit up the depths of the Comanche's piercing eyes.

"Velvet Foot keeps some things to himself," was his significant retort.

"All right!" but you ought to know, an' I'll tell you hyer, thet Dead Line hes a right ter know who and what thet fellar is. Not an hour ago we swore—ther hull set ov us, Injun—thet we'd hang ther man what insulted this burg by callin' for a certain letter in Clover Phil's window. Thet letter war an insult, an' it war sent hyer ter insult us all. Wal, Cap'n Clutch called for it an' got it. He took it away with him afore we could keep our word."

Despite his immobility the Comanche gave a slight start.

"He stood up in his stirrups an' wavin' thet letter over his head, laughed at us all, an' then cut his name on the window with his diamond ring. Now, hev'n't we a right ter know suthin' about thet smart Aleck from Taos? Ef thar's a human in Dead Line ter-night thet kin enlighten us, Velvet Foot, thet human is yerself. Will you tell me?"

Before he replied the Comanche threw him-

self upon the back of his horse, and then turning quickly upon Red Scar Dave said in a whisper:

"Captain Clutch hates every man in Dead Line!"

"He does, eh?" cried Red Scar. "Hang me! ef I didn't think I saw hatred in his eyes ther first time I caught 'im. Wal, thar's no love lost, Comanche. I kin speak for ther hull crowd an' assure ye ov thet. Hates us all, does he? In what way did Dead Line ever cross his path?"

"Let Red Scar think."

"I could do thet an' die a thousand miles from the mark. Seems ter me I've seen Cap'n Clutch afore, but I can't git a grip on the circumstance sufficient ter retain it. War thet his name always?"

"No."

"What has it been?"

Velvet Foot could not help smiling at the ruffian's eagerness.

Red Scar Dave had cleared the ground between him and the horse, and now stood at the Comanche's thigh with a pair of anxious eyes fixed upon his face.

"Tell me who that Taos tiger is," he said. "You'll be doin' Dead Line a favor, an' come what may we'll all stand by you."

"Velvet Foot never calls for help when on a trail," responded the Indian proudly. "He always gets to the end of it without assistance."

"Of course, but thar will come a time when you'll want help. It comes some time in the life of every man, white or red."

Red Scar ceased and waited for the expected revelation, but the lips of the Indian did not move.

"Not goin' ter tell me, eh?" exclaimed the ruffian in suppressed passion. "This is another ov yer infernal secrets. See hyer, Velvet Foot. Hev'n't you got sense enough ter see thet ef Dead Line turns ag'in' ye, they'll make this kentry too hot fer ther Comanche spy? An Injun in this part ov Uncle Sam's claim never gains anything by bein' stubborn. Very well! Ef you don't want ter give Cap'n Clutch away, keep ther secret, an' take ther consequences. Good-night."

Red Scar's conclusion was so abrupt that it astonished the Comanche, and ere he recovered, the mad Dead Liner had turned his back to him and was deliberately walking away.

"Hol hol come back, Red Scar!" called Velvet Foot, and the suddenness with which the ruffian turned was ludicrous.

He came forward again with a face lit up with expectancy, and halted once more beside the Indian.

"Now," his eyes said. "Tell me what you know about Cap'n Clutch."

Velvet Foot continued to regard the Dead Liner for a moment longer and then spoke:

"Captain Clutch is one of the twin brothers."

"My God! no!" cried Red Scar. "Then his old name is—"

"Captain Theobald," finished the Comanche.

Red Scar Dave almost bounded from the ground.

"The boys must know this right away," he announced. "He said he war comin' back. Cap'n Theobald, eh? Mebbe he'll want ter sarve Dead Line the way we sarved Pistol Pocket City a few years ago. It would only be fair play, Comanche, but he sha'n't succeed hyer! I'll post the boys an' we'll get ready for him. Like enough he's got a hull menagerie ov tigers at his back, but what of that? He sha'n't treat us ez we once treated him. By heavens! he shall not, Velvet Foot!"

Impressed with the belief that instant action had to be taken, Red Scar Dave was about to bound away when the red hand of the Indian fell upon his shoulder.

"Listen to Velvet Foot," he commanded, in stern tones. "I am on a trail that leads—"

"Go to glory!" interrupted the mountain rough. "Foller yer trail, but don't try ter dictate ter Dead Line. The boys shall know who Cap'n Clutch is an' what he's after. I didn't recognize him, an' yet I might hev caught ther right flash ov his eyes. I'd like ter know who saved him when he war tied to a tree in ther midst ov a burnin' camp? But that's not ter be thought of now. We know thet he's found us all an' thet's enough. I'll post the boys."

Red Scar Dave broke from the Indian's grasp and started off.

The eyes of the red-skin glowed like two coals of fire as he wheeled his horse and started after the Dead Liner.

"Velvet Foot says 'stand!' " he called out.

"Stand I will, but it'll be death to you!" was the retort, and the hand of Red Scar whipped

forth a revolver as he turned. "By the eternal! no Comanche spy shall interfere with Dead Line's business!"

Up went the weapon, but ere it covered the red-skin, he was upon Red Scar like a jaguar, and the next second the hand that knocked the pistol down dealt a staggering blow full in the face that almost lifted the huge Dead Liner off his feet.

Red Scar Dave measured his length on the ground, and the Comanche, remounting his horse, spurred him over the body and shot through the town like a bounding rocket.

As he passed the group still in front of the post-office, he saluted them with a strange cry and disappeared the next instant in the direction taken by Captain Clutch.

"Thet Injun's up to some'ing," remarked Clover Phil. "Thar's a link between him an' the bound thet euchered us out ov thet letter. My prediction is thet we ar' goin' ter hev a time."

"An' a bloody time, too!" grated the man who startled the entire group. "I tell you thet Cap'n Clutch is ther old Cap'n Theobald ov Pistol Pocket, an'—"

"Fire—fire!" was the terrible interruption, and into the midst of the tongs of Dead Line sprung a beautiful young girl, whose face was pallor itself and whose eyes were all excitement.

"Don't you see that Dead Line is doomed?" she continued, pointing toward the southern portion of the town where several cabins were burning. "A man with a torch did it all. I saw him plainly—a giant, with a laced jacket and long, black hair."

"Captain Clutch!" vociferated a dozen members of the crowd.

"No!" yelled Red Scar; "Cap'n Theobald!"

CHAPTER III.

A SPECIMEN ROUGH.

It took no second look to tell the roughs of Dead Line that their mountain resort was doomed.

For a moment they stood maddened and dazed by the flames that leaped skyward above the cluster of wooden shanties they had attacked; then, with revolvers drawn, they dashed toward the menaced quarter.

The girl had told the truth: Dead Line City would soon be numbered among the places of the past.

Fanned by the brisk wind that had sprung up since sunset, as if to facilitate the incendiary's work, the volume of flame rushed onward, seizing upon shanty after shanty in its fury, and making sure of Dead Line's destruction.

Red Scar Dave and his pards halted in the light of the flames and dared Captain Clutch to show himself.

With many an oath and threat they called upon him to come forth and face them "like a man"—when they were twenty to one, and each swarthy hand clutched a six-chambered revolver!

"The coward has vamosed! He has accomplished his work," said Clover Phil. "Thar ar' a few things in Dead Line thet kin be saved. We gain nothin' by standin' hyar. This is Cap'n Theobald's revenge for ther burnin' ov Pistol Pocket, but we'll more than loop 'im for it!"

With one accord the ruffians sent a yell of rage and vengeance toward the stars, and turned back to save certain things from the shanties yet untouched but in the path of the flames.

It was an exciting scene, for the wind had suddenly increased in force, and the Dead Liners were compelled to work fast.

They labored like bees maddened by the burning of their hive, and at last succeeded in getting the most valuable things worth saving beyond the crimson fingers of the fire.

Huddled together in a mountain pass a short distance from Dead Line stood the exasperated roughs. Their goods were heaped near by, and they had turned from them to watch the doom of the last houses left to feed the flames.

They could not but acknowledge that Captain Clutch had only taken vengeance for wrongs in the past, but they did not think of this while they cursed him in no guarded tones, and swore to pay him a thousandfold for the sudden destruction of the border den.

Meanwhile, standing among some bushes that grew half-way up a lofty eminence was a handsome man surveying with flashing eyes and folded arms the burning of Dead Line.

"They thought they had me once! the fools!" fell from his lips. "I've carried the war into Africa, but not until I had waited till their af-

fairs war in prosperous condition. I held off until Dead Line war larger than Pistol Pocket war when the flames ate it up. They thought they had seen the last of Captain Theobald when they left him tied to a tree in the midst of their burnin' camp! Ha! they didn't know with whom they war dealin'. I'm the boss tiger of the New Mexican menagerie. I changed my name for a purpose, an' for years I have held off for this time. They didn't discover when I rode away with the letter awhile ago that I am Captain Theobald. They may hev heard of Captain Clutch, but I doubt it."

The burning town was a grand spectacle, and it made the eyes of the speaker glisten with delight.

From where he stood he saw the Dead Liners moving hither and thither as they worked to rescue some things from the fire, and not until the last one had taken refuge among the mountains did he stir an inch.

"My vengeance, galoots of Dead Line!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Whar's yer ruffians' den to-night? I've burned ye out like a lot of rats; but the end is not yet. No, the worst is yet ter come!"

He disappeared as if by magic, and while the last shanties fed the wind-swept flames, the place where he stood resumed its old appearance.

"The old home's gone, curse that demon!" grated the youngest member of the party congregated in the mountain-pass.

"But we'll build a better one," said the young girl with resolution in eyes and voice as she turned upon him. "I hate this Captain Clutch, as they call him. Once, as he was firing the second shanty, I had a chance to shoot him, but before I could get the weapon, he had vanished. Another moment, Ivan, and he would have fallen in his tracks."

"I'm glad you didn't drop him, Princess," said the young man.

"It might have saved a part of the town."

"But it would have cheated us of some choice vengeance."

"Do you expect to get even with Captain Clutch?"

"Ay, that I do!"

"When?"

"The first time I meet him, and I hope nothing will delay the hour!"

"I would hasten it if I could," answered the girl. "But what about the letter he carried from the post-office, to-night?"

"It didn't amount to much, only the boys looked upon it as an insult to Dead Line. It was addressed to the ugliest person in the city."

"And no one would claim it?" interrupted the girl with a smile.

"Nobody, but Captain Clutch."

"Hol hol! why didn't I know it was at the office? It should not have wanted a claimant long."

Ivan the youth stared into his companion's face.

"What! would you have claimed it, girl?" he cried.

"Why not?"

"But it didn't fit you!"

"Oh, that would have made no difference."

"The boys, though, had sworn that no citizen of Dead Line should claim the letter. That's how it came to fall into Captain Clutch's hands."

"I would like to know what the captain read when he broke the seal. Wouldn't you, Ivan?"

"Oh, I don't care," was the careless rejoinder. "I expect it was something like an April fool letter, not worth the tearing open. Captain Clutch is welcome to it for all I care, but I hate him for what he did to-night; that's it, Princess Pet. I didn't help burn Pistol Pocket City which was this demon's delight; I had no hand in the hanging of his twin brother, though, on general principles, I guess both deserved the noose."

"But turn about is fair play, Ivan, I am told."

"Perhaps it is, but I hate Captain Clutch all the same. Two hours ago you had a home, girl, now, by the accursed act of the Taos Tiger, you have none! I more than half believe that that Comanche brave is in league with the captain. They both reached Dead Line not an hour apart, and both rode off in the same direction. Then, when Red Scar Dave was about to tell the boys that Captain Clutch and Captain Theobald were one and the same person, this Indian knocked him senseless. They're in league, I say, and woe to that so-called Indian detective if a Dead Liner gets the drop on him. Let him look out if I get it!"

Princess Pet would have replied if a stern voice had not rung out in startling tones, and the young couple turned to find themselves confronted by more than one-half of the banded roughs, with the stalwart figure of Red Scar Dave at their head.

"That's ther man I accuse!" cried the marked ruffian and his outstretched fingers described Ivan who involuntarily recoiled a pace. "We can't have pisen among us at this time, I say. I say thet ef thet galoot hedn't been among us to-night, Cap'n Clutch would never hev come!"

A thrilling silence followed Red Scar's close.

"What's that?" exclaimed the girl, fixing her eyes on the mountain rough. "Ivan has done nothing wrong. He never knew that Captain Clutch existed until he saw him get the mysterious letter."

"That's all very well, girl. I don't like ter see you put in for a snake in the grass," responded Red Scar. "Let us deal with him ez he deserves. I accuse him. I guess he knows me—Red Scar Dave, no slouch an' no coward! Thar he stands, boys," and the rough threw a swift look at the gang at his back. "He's heard of Cap'n Clutch afore. I'm sorry ter hev ter dispute the girl's words, but I stand up for Dead Line and vengeance! We can't afford ter keep plotters in our midst. Ivan, thar, is Cap'n Clutch's pard!"

This horrible accusation fell upon the camp like the descent of a thunderbolt.

It drove all color from the young man's face, and he stood for a moment before the dark-faced crowd like a person suddenly deprived of his senses by some overwhelming calamity.

"I'm through, boys!" went on Red Scar Dave. "Thar he stands, Cap'n Clutch's spy! Ef you want thet kind o' truck in camp, keep him ter keep thet Taos Tiger posted. I'll git out ov yer way."

"You will hear me first!" suddenly exclaimed Ivan, and a mad stride carried him toward the Dead Liner who, confident that he had succeeded in his purpose, had turned away. "Prove that I ever gave that New Mexican monster aid and comfort, and I will put the rope around my own neck. I proclaim the words of Red Scar Dave an infamous lie! He has coined them for a purpose which he can not hide. Me a traitor to Dead Line? If he knew that I was Captain Clutch's spy, why didn't he accuse me before? No! in the light of the old camp he faces me with an accusation which he knows is a lie. Stand back, men of Dead Line City! Let me face this lying monster. He has just said that I have betrayed you all. Let me give him the lie at the muzzle of the revolver."

Red Scar Dave saw the weapon that leaped into the starlight as Ivan's fingers touched the butt, but instead of drawing one to defend himself, he merely straightened and laughed in derision.

"I don't soil my hands with traitors!" he exclaimed. "I leave him for you to deal with, pards ov wiped-out Dead Line. I swear to you before heaven that that youngster is Cap'n Clutch's spy an' pard. We ar' both before you. Whose word will you take—mine er his? Thar he stands. I don't want his life. It's in the hands of the camp he only entered ter betray!"

Then, as he shut his teeth in a manner which told that he would say no more, Red Scar Dave stepped back with a meaning look at the swarthy crowd.

"Liar! By heavens! you sha'n't escape me!" cried Ivan, the accused.

Up went the pistol his right hand clutched; but before it could cover the ruffian's head, Princess Pet threw herself upon his outstretched arm and broke it down.

"No! Let the viper crawl away," she cried, looking into Ivan's face. "The lie is too transparent to set one man against you. Red Scar Dave, I will vouch for this man's loyalty."

"You?" and the mountain rough wheeled with another of his bitter laughs. "You vouch for his loyalty?" and he strode toward Princess Pet, whom he seemed to penetrate with his glowering look. "Look hyer, my mountain pansy! You're liable ter get inter trouble by championin' thet young badger's cause. You've seen me a thousand times, but, by heaven! you don't know me yet! Goin' ter stand by thet chap, eh?"

"Yes!" flashed the young girl's eyes. "Stand by him, then! I had an idea it had gone about this far. Thar he stands, boys—Cap'n Clutch's spy an' pard! Don't mind the girl. I'll look after her; you deal with Ivan, the traitor," and Red Scar Dave turned and walked away.

CHAPTER IV.

THE GIRL TAKES A HAND.

"YES!" broke from the youth's lips, as he sent a mad look after the retreating tough. "If I am a traitor pull me up to the handiest limb. I will speak no more for myself."

The Dead Liners looked nonplused; but Clover Phil, the postmaster, broke the silence.

"Give the boy a chance," he said, with a quick look at the beautiful girl. "We don't know that he is in league with our enemy. Red Scar has accused, but he furnishes no proof."

"Do you want proof after my word?" thundered back the bully of Dead Line, and all who looked saw him standing a few yards away in the shadow of a rock where he had halted. "Is thet coddling's word to outweigh mine? Proof! ter perdition with proof! I swear thet he is Cap'n Clutch's pard. Isn't thet enough, or hev ye gone cl'ar back on Red Scar Dave?"

In the silence that followed the ruffian bounded from the shadows, and halted not until he stood before the Dead Line toughs.

"Sw'ar me!" he shouted, lifting his right hand. "Ef thar's a man among ye capable ov administerin' an oath, sw'ar Red Scar."

The crowd looked perplexed.

"Give him a chance to speak," said Ivan, coming to their relief. "I am willing that my accusers should be heard. Administer the oath, and let us hear his charges."

Thus encouraged by the youth who stood with fearless mien in the presence of the crowd, matters were simplified, and a minute later a rough oath was administered to the bully who seemed eager to tell a story of some kind.

It was surely a dramatic scene, the dark-faced judges in the mountain pass, the bold accuser, the victim, and the only true friend he seemed to have, a young girl, not more than eighteen.

The light of burning Dead Line had subsided, and the only kind that revealed the thrilling scene came from the stars that studded the unclouded canopy of the skies.

"Now, Red Scar, you kin talk," said Clover Phil, as the bully's hand dropped again at his side.

"That's clever," sneered Red Scar Dave. "What do I know? Now watch that youngster thar an' see 'im wince. Three nights ago he sneaked out ov Dead Line an' put a letter under a stone at a sart'in place which it is unnecessary fer me ter locate. I saw ther hull operation. By an' by, just when I war about ter nail thet dockement ter see what he war up ter, I saw a horse comin' up. On thet crittur war a man who hed long hair an' a laced jacket. Wal, he got down an' felt under ther mountain post-office till he tackled ther letter. Is thet a lie, Ivan?" and Red Scar whirled upon the young man.

"I went to the stone," was the quick reply. "I put a letter under it, but not for Captain Clutch."

"Half confessed to, but ther hull story acknowledged," said Red Scar Dave. "Wal, I follered ther man in ther laced jacket, but he gave me ther slip. But," and the speaker's hand disappeared beneath his dark shirt, "he dropped his letter on ther trail, an' fate guided me to it. I've got it hyer, Ivan, my daisy spy! Oh, you can't deny yer own writin'. Hyer it is—ther identical letter Captain Theobald, er Captain Clutch ez he calls himself, took from under thet stone. Strike a light. I offer it in evidence."

The hand of Red Scar Dave extended the letter as he finished, and Clover Phil, who seemed to be judge advocate of the border court, advanced to take it.

At the same time the crack of a lucifer was heard, and the flame produced revealed the anxious faces of all.

Ivan had fastened a curious look on the piece of paper which had just passed from Red Scar's hands into Clover Phil's possession.

"Can it be that my enemy has the letter I left under the stone?" he murmured. "I am not ashamed of it; but not for the world would I have it fall into their hands. It was never intended for them."

Clover Phil unfolded the letter, and after giving some direction about the position of the little torch, he proceeded to read it.

"Hello! what's this?" suddenly exclaimed the postmaster of Dead Line, and he threw a glance through his long lashes at Red Scar Dave, who stood erect, with folded arms and black eyes that blazed with victory.

"Read it an' see," he snapped. "I offer thet letter in evidence. By Jove! it would stretch a seraph's neck!"

"They're all together," said Clover Phil, reading aloud. "Now's ther time to strike the den. You

must not forget Pistol Pocket, captain. Let your vengeance be as terrible as the oath you have taken!"

The roughs of Dead Line looked blankly and horrified at one another as Clover Phil reached the end of the letter.

"Thar!" blurted Red Scar. "How does that strike ye, pards ov Dead Line? Thet's ther letter I found in the trail just after Cap'n Clutch left ther mountain post-office."

All eyes were turned upon Ivan, who seemed to draw a breath of relief.

The postmaster was white, since reading that letter he had lost all color, and the document actually shook in his hands.

"What do you say, Ivan?" he asked addressing the young man.

Princess Pet glided closer to him ere he spoke.

"If that is your letter, you are doomed," she said in low tones. "For Heaven's sake, Ivan—"

He waited to hear no more, but stepping fearlessly forward, he halted before them all and threw his right hand solemnly toward the stars.

"You've listened to Red Scar's oath; now hear mine!" he shouted. "I swear in the presence of Heaven itself that I never penned a line of that infamous letter. It is the work of a traitor, but not mine. It may have been found under the stone; but I never put it there, and the man who says I wrote it lies from his heart!"

"Thank Heaven!" ejaculated the girl, but her words were drowned by the coarse, brutal laugh of Red Scar Dave.

"Lyin' it to ther end, boys!" he laughed. "He went to ther stone that night; he says he did. He put a letter under it; he doesn't deny that, an' ther paper Clover Phil just read is ther only one Cap'n Clutch found thar. I'm ther galoot that says he wrote that paper that invited the boss tiger ov Taos ter Dead Line. He may say that I lie from the heart. I don't care. I turn him over to you. You ar' court an' jury; I'm only witness. Give me the paper back, Clover."

"I'd like to keep it," and the postmaster of Dead Line refused to extend the document which had doomed the youth.

"Wal, keep it then," said Red Scar. "It's nothin ter me arter it has accomplished its purpose. It fetched Cap'n Clutch ter Dead Line. Go back an' look at ther old town while Ivan ther traitor pleads for mercy. Pards ov Dead Line, believe that letter an' hang the traitor what wrote it."

Ivan proudly erect, did not blanch.

"Arrest him!" said Clover Phil, and then he added to the youth: "Boy, I guess that letter is all the evidence we want. It's bad evidence, but black an' white never lies."

A dozen men stepped toward the accused, who instinctively recoiled.

He was in the dark shadow of the lynchers' noose.

"You shall not!" suddenly rung out the clear voice of the girl, and before the foremost man could lay hands on Ivan, she sprang forward and landed between him and them. "There is no signature to that letter—"

"I should reckon not. Traitors never sign their names," sneered Red Scar.

"Arrest him!" again commanded Clover Phil.

All at once Princess Pet wheeled upon Ivan, who since his challenge to fight the king of the Dead Line toughs, had not put up his revolver.

The next moment she tore the weapon from his grasp, and had whirled upon the Dead Line pards before one could comprehend her intention.

"Stand!" she exclaimed, and up went the hand that now clutched the astonished Ivan's revolver. "There is a traitor in camp, but men do not call him Ivan!"

"Ho! ho!" shouted Red Scar Dave. "Ar' you galoots goin' ter let a gal eucher the hull crowd? Clover Phil, is that ther kind ov a stand ye make fer Dead Line?"

The postmaster colored deeply and came toward the girl.

"Halt!" she said, in the sternest of tones. "Another step, Clover Phil, and I will send a bullet through your head! You know that Ivan is no traitor, and, what is more, you know who the traitor is!"

Clover Phil was seen to halt, and then to recoil a step, as if the girl's last words were an arrow that had gone home.

"I speak for the boy!" exclaimed a loud voice that came down from a point above the heads of the crowd. "Ivan is no traitor. He never wrote the letter that has just been read."

The Taos Tiger's spy an' pard stands among you now!"

Not a man stirred while these words were being spoken, and as the last one died away the voice of Princess Pet sounded in tones of triumph.

"Vindicated!" she exclaimed. "Ivan is not the traitor, but the Taos Tiger's pard stands in our midst."

"Yes," cried Red Scar Dave. "Vindicated, as you say, my daisy shootist, but by whom? Go up thar an' look into ther face ov Ivan's vindicator!"

"Yes, come up an' face the red trailer of the Comanches," came down from above. "Come and let me pick out the traitor."

"Velvet Foot!" cried Princess Pet.

CHAPTER V.

THE CAPTAIN SHOOT.

THERE was a flash of triumph and pride in the young girl's eyes.

Red Scar Dave, who had recoiled a foot and whipped out his revolvers, was throwing fierce looks up the mountain-side.

He knew that voice, he knew that Velvet Foot, the Comanche, was the speaker, the Indian who, a few minutes, scarcely an hour, before, sent him reeling to the ground with a tremendous blow.

"Don't I know that red ruffian?" he grated. "It's the infernal brute that sent me tumblin' for'ard in Dead Line. 'Yes,' to Princess Pet, 'stand beside that youngster an' call 'im vindicated. Ef the pards ov Dead Line want ter take testimony like ther Injun's, all right! I sha'n't object, but by heavens! I'll settle with Velvet Foot afore he's an hour older!"

"You'd better not," said the girl.

Red Scar Dave received this admonition with a derisive laugh, and stepped back.

"We ar' goin' to give you a chance," said Clover Phil, addressing Ivan. "Thar isn't a man ov Dead Line who wants to believe you a traitor, not one. But ther evidence ov the letter found under the bowlder—"

"It wasn't found there! Red Scar Dave admits that he found it in the trail, some distance from the stone. I never wrote a line of it. I am not the traitor."

"We'll try you a while longer, Ivan. If we find out that you hev played Dead Line false at any time, your neck won't be worth a copper."

The youth smiled.

"I am willing," he said.

Meanwhile the figure of a man was creeping up the shadowed trail of the mountain.

He was not alone, for he led the advance of a little party of five men like himself, dark-faced, evil-eyed, and goaded forward by a fierce determination.

"I failed ter get ther boy hung, but the next time I'll manage it better. I hed ter strike him hard, but I'm afraid I overdid the bizness. They can't b'lieve Ivan a traitor. I asked 'em ter b'lieve too much. By an' by—"

He was stopped by the touch of a hand, and turning his head he looked into the face of one of the men who had been creeping at his back.

"Wal, Placer, what's up?" he asked.

"We can't corral that red-skin," was the answer.

"Can't, eh? Foller me a little further an' see."

"Do you expect to find him whar he war a few minutes ago?"

"Mebbe not, but we'll strike his trail. I tell you that Velvet Foot an' Cap'n Clutch ar' pards."

"What did you think ov what the Injun said—thet Ivan war no traitor an' thet the real traitor stood among us then?"

Red Scar Dave clinched his swarthy hands.

"What do I think ov that?" he echoed.

"Wal, sir, it's a lie—an Injun lie told ter shield an' ter save the Comanche's friend."

"Ivan?"

"Who else would it save?"

"I don't know."

"Ov course ye don't. I tell you, pards, thet ef thet boy, Ivan, hed died in his mother's arms, Cap'n Clutch would never hev come ter Dead Line to-night," the ruffian continued. "I know it. An' you chaps stood by an' never lifted a hand fer vengeance."

"We looked to Clover Phil."

"To that chicken hearted galoot?" sneered Red Scar. "He won't do anything when thar's a woman's eyes on him till he's pushed to the wall. The day we took Ivan inter camp war a black one for Dead Line. We didn't think it would turn out thus, but I warn't long seein' the drift ov things."

When the black boss came inter ther town with a senseless, frozen boy tied to ther saddle none ov us expected thet he would turn traitor some day, an' thus pay us all for warmin' him back inter life. No, sir; nobody dreamed ov treachery then. An' when, a year later, we accidentally run across an old wagon on ther old Durango trail an' found it ter contain a half-starved girl we didn't think thet afterward thet same girl would step between the young traitor an' justice. You all know thet thet's how we got on to thet precious pair back yonder. It's no secret, but it hez turned out a sorry day for Dead Line City. Thet Cap'n Clutch is a devil. Who knows but that he tied thet youngster on the boss with his consent an' sent him inter Dead Line ter play spy for him? If I had thought this then, I'd hev finished his career afore he thawed out. Ivan allus swore his cold ride war Injun work, an' some ov us hev b'lieved him for years, but now we know it's a lie."

Red Scar Dave held the attention of his companions until he finished.

They had halted on the mountain trail fifty feet above the camp of the burned out Dead Liners and some distance from it.

"I'll bet my weapons thet Clover Phil has dismissed the case ag'in' Ivan afore this," the Comanche ruffian went on. "He wants traitors in camp, but I don't."

"Neither do we!" was the quick response.

"Then let us resolve ter hev none. Thar ar' six ov us hyer—enough ter run things, ter hev our own way! We came up hyer ter corral thet Injun, but he's lit out afore this, though we kin strike his trail. No traitors in camp an' no love-makin', either. We'll shake on this!"

Red Scar Dave held out his hand to the men who had grouped themselves about him.

"One question first," said one of the five.

"Sail in, Placer."

"What do you mean by love makin'?"

"Just what I said. Thar's a girl in camp. She's pretty as a picter, an' somebody's liable ter lose his heart."

"Do you mean Ivan?"

"I mean everybody, but the boy in particular ov course. No man must make love ter Princess Pet while we seek ter avenge the burnin' ov Dead Line."

"Thet's satisfactory, Red Scar. No traitors an' no love-makin'. I accept the motto in all its meanings! We'll shake over it now."

In the ghostly shadows of rock and tree the six pards of Dead Line shook hands and registered in Heaven a terrible oath to hang the first, and to break up the second.

"One came ter Dead Line on a boss, ther other war found in an old wagon," said Red Scar Dave after the oath. "We've got ter look after both. One already has been caught writin' letters ter Cap'n Clutch, an' t'other, the girl, steps between him an' the noose. Now for the Injun."

Once more the ruffian band glided forward with the bully of Dead Line in the van.

"I'm fixin' things for the future," he said under his breath. "The boys will make short work ov Ivan. The youngster's got no show now, even if Clover Phil an' the rest ov the camp take a stand for him. I'm goin' ter win in this game. The first time I looked into thet rickety old wagon the reds left on the trail an' saw yer half starved face, Princess. I said to myself, 'Hyers a bonanza ov beauty. Red Scar, an' I've watched you ever since. Now, let thet boy try ter cheat me out ov my stake, let any livin' man try it if he dares! At my back ar' five ov the best pards ov Dead Line, an' ef I can't win with them I ought ter to lose the game."

Ten minutes later the Comanche trailers came to a halt more than a hundred feet above the camp, but the spot where they expected to find Velvet Foot they found vacant although a moccasin track in the soft earth of the trail told them that it had lately been tenanted.

"I want ter choke out ov thet red-skin the name of the man he calls a traitor," growled Red Scar Dave. "An' I wouldn't mind meetin' Cap'n Clutch."

"Is that so, Red Scar Dave?" sung out a voice so stern and clear that the half-dozen involuntarily recoiled at the same moment.

"Thet's what I said," stammered the Dead Line ruffian.

"Wal, hyer I am!" and there stepped into the trail a veritable giant who was easily seen despite the uncertain light of the stars.

Proudly erect he stood, with his light sombrero thrown back, revealing a broad though swarthy forehead, and a handsome face whose main ornament was a Mexicanish mustache.

The Dead Liners recognized him in the twinkling of an eye.

"Cap'n Clutch!" they ejaculated.

"The man from Pistol Pocket, a place which a few years ago went up in smoke like your town has done to-night. You rather wanted to see me, Red Scar. Wai, look yer eyes out."

Silence seemed to have placed a seal on the lips of Red Scar Dave.

Scarcely more than fifteen feet separated Captain Clutch and the banded six of Dead Line.

The latter saw the gleaming revolver-barrels that drooped below the Taos Tiger's hands.

"Hands up! every mother's son ov yer!" suddenly shouted Captain Clutch as up went the revolvers and covered the desperadoes in his path. "Hands up er die whar ye stand! I'm no boy, roughs ov Dead Line!"

Red Scar Dave glanced at his pards.

"Up!" he said in a whisper which was almost a hiss. "The drop is ag'in' us. Accommodate the Taos hyena."

The next moment twelve dark hands were lifted above the heads of the halted Dead Liners, and Captain Clutch's mad eye fairly snapped.

"Now!" he laughed. "I'm goin' ter spoil yer grips. You won't be able ter shake with ther next friend you meet."

The last word was lost among the rapid shots of the two revolvers which the Taos ruffian had thrust almost into the very faces of the astonished toughs, and every bullet hit a human hand!

The flashes of the captain's revolvers were incessant, the many shots seemed one continuous sound.

"That's for Pistol Pocket!" he exclaimed as the wounded ruffians fairly danced and yelled in their pain. "I'm the boss tiger ov ther Taos menagerie, an' I've been unchained for a spell. I had a brother once, but the louts ov Dead Line City lengthened his neck! Turn about's fair play, my mountain lizards! Crawl back to camp an' show yer hands!"

He turned away, but there sprung after him a man who dared him to halt.

"Do you want to die now, Red Scar?" he hissed wheeling upon the Dead Liner. "I had reserved you for a different fate, but if you want to go, take that!"

There was another shot, and Red Scar Dave dropped in his tracks!

CHAPTER VI.

SO DOES CLOVER PHIL.

"WHAT meant the letter you hid under the stone?" asked Princess Pet the Dead Line waif as she looked up into Ivan's face when the camp had become quiet after the accusation and its result.

Ivan looked down into the young girl's eyes and for a moment made no reply.

"It meant no treason, Princess," he said presently. "I don't know who wrote the letter Red Scar Dave found in the trail after Captain Clutch robbed the mountain post-office, but I did not."

"I believe that, Ivan, but you acknowledged that you hid a letter there?"

"I did."

"And it was not for Captain Clutch?"

"A thousand times no!" cried the boy, flushing to his temples. "I loathe, detest that villain. I will never league myself with such a monster, and Red Scar knew that his accusation was a mass of lies while he was making it. There was a method in that devil's madness. He hates me, and yet I never raised a hand against him."

"Let the ruffian go. I shall dismiss him from my mind," said the girl.

"But I can't from mine," was the response. "I will know why he accused me of treason," and the young man clinched his hands.

"Now that I am suspected, I might as well move forward."

"Not to treachery, Ivan?"

"No! the men down yonder are not worth betraying. Clover Phil may be a little better than the rest, but I doubt it."

"He dismissed the case against you."

"Yes, when you faced him with a cocked revolver and dared him and his backers to advance a step," smiled Ivan. "Last night I had made up my mind to leave the pards of Dead Line, now I shall remain."

"They may warn you off."

"Ah! that would be another thing, Princess. When Red Scar comes back, I look for trouble."

Princess Pet might have replied if a human

figure had not stepped into view, and she recoiled with a light cry.

"Ar' you busy, Ivan?" said the man, who was Clover Phil, late postmaster at Dead Line.

"No," answered Ivan, advancing and halting before Clover Phil. "Do you want to see me?"

"For a moment."

Seeing that her presence was not desired there by the Dead Liner, Princess Pet withdrew with an admonitory glance at Ivan, and the two men were alone.

"I didn't take any stock in Red Scar's charge from the first," said Clover Phil. "I'm hyer ter tell ye this, Ivan, but also ter ask ye a question."

"Well?"

"Who do you suspect?"

"Of what?"

"Ov treason," said the bronzed postmaster.

"You heard what the Comanche said. He cl'ared you, an' said that another man is in league with Cap'n Clutch. Who is he?"

"I haven't thought," said Ivan, with a smile.

"Oh, you hev'n't? Don't you think we oughter ferret the traitor out an' hang him?"

"It wouldn't be a bad idea."

"I should remark that it wouldn't!" grinned Clover Phil. "Hyar we ar', with Dead Line in ashes behind us an' a traitor in the camp. Hang me, ef the thought is a pleasant one! But mebbe thet red-skin lied."

"No. I am convinced that he told the truth."

Clover Phil seemed to recoil an inch.

"What proof hev you? Out with it!"

"The proof of the letter you read before the whole camp."

"Mebbe it warn't written in Dead Line."

"Prove that it wasn't, and the Indian is a liar!" triumphantly exclaimed Ivan.

Clover Phil was silent.

"I can't just prove that," he said, a moment later; "but I say thet the red-skin lied. You didn't write it; ther Injun says a Dead Liner did. Now, who writ that letter?"

Ere Ivan could answer he heard a quick footstep behind him, and before he could turn a man sprung upon him, and clutched his throat before he could make the slightest resistance.

It was the work of a second.

"Not a word, youngster!" was hissed in his ear. "We don't care a cuss who writ thet letter. We ar' goin' ter settle you forever!"

A stride brought Clover Phil to the spot, and Ivan saw the unmistakable gleam of triumph that lit up the ruffian's eyes.

"Yes, Ivan, we can't have even a suspected traitor in camp these times," he said. "Horseshoe Hank an' I will deal with you. I didn't like ter do it among the pards a while ago, but now, Ivan, you ar' goin' ter leave Dead Line forever."

"By your hands?" flashed the youth.

"Kinder so," was the quick answer. "Hold him fast thar, Horseshoe, an' march 'im straight ahead! Forward!"

Ivan shut his teeth and said nothing.

He saw that he was completely at the mercy of the two men, and as he was marched from the spot, held by Horseshoe Hank and menaced by the heavy six-shooter that was clutched by Clover Phil's hand, he could readily believe that he was going to his doom.

The trail was narrow and somewhat tortuous, but the stars showed the Dead Liners the way, and not a word was spoken until Clover Phil ordered a halt and wheeled upon the prisoner.

"Look around you, Ivan," he said. "Do you know whar you ar'?"

The youth's eyes told that he had already recognized the spot.

"Ah! you've been hyer afore, eh?" continued the postmaster rough. "About four years ago we brought a boss-thief hyer an' made 'im jump from thet rock," and the bronzed finger of the speaker pointed to a flat rock whose surface was as smooth as glass. "Stand him up thar, Horseshoe. Thar! Now step back an' cover him."

The following minute the three commands had been obeyed, and Ivan, the young Mazeppa of Colorado, stood free on the surface of the rock, at the mercy of the two desperadoes whose revolvers were at his head.

A step to the left and he would disappear over the edge of a precipice whose walls no man had ever measured.

It was a terrible cliff, and far below its pebbly fringe a little stream rippled over rocks that glittered here and there like shining nuggets of silver.

Not a weapon did he now possess, for the

band of Clover Phil's pard had stripped him of all, and he was indeed helpless in the starlight before the ruffians' eyes.

Still, for all the danger he did not quail.

The horror of the situation did not daunt him; he even seemed to increase an inch in stature as he gave the Dead Liners look for look.

"Your days ar' numbered," suddenly said Clover Phil. "You've been a Jonah ter Dead Line ever since thet black boss brought you from Heaven knows whar. Now, before you go, answer two questions."

Ivan made no reply with lips, but his eyes shot defiance into the cruel orbs of Clover Phil, and told the tough that he had more than met his match in courage.

"Did the Injuns really tie ye to thet boss?" asked the postmaster, who displayed a good deal of eagerness as he leaned forward anxious not to miss a word of Ivan's reply.

"I have told Dead Line so a thousand times," was the answer.

"An' you ar' goin' ter stick to it ter the last?"

"Yes."

"All right. Now, who in yer candid opinion wrote the letter that told Cap'n Clutch ter come ter Dead Line?"

"The only man in Dead Line who was cool enough to write such a letter."

A hasty step carried the postmaster forward.

"What's that?" he cried. "Do you mean—"

He stopped suddenly, for just then a number of revolver-shots greeted the ears of all, and Horseshoe Hank so far forgot himself as to turn about with an exclamation.

"My God! Clover Phil," he cried, "Red Scar Dave has found the Injun!"

Clover Phil did not speak until the last report had died away, and the silence of night had once more settled down upon the spot where the deadly revolvers had been emptied.

"That means death to somebody," he said. "Come back to yer work, Horseshoe. Cover thet young Jonah. I'm at the end ov the game. I war goin' ter ask him a question when the revolvers went off up thar, but I'll not trouble him with it."

"You need not, Clover Phil," said Ivan. "You were goin' to ask me who wrote the traitor's letter for Captain Clutch."

Clover Phil could not repress a cry.

"Do you want to see him, Horseshoe?" And Ivan turned to the astonished pard as he raised his arm. "There stands the traitor of Dead Line. Clover Phil, I brand you as the pard, the spy, of Captain Clutch, the Taos Tiger!"

The voice, the outstretched hand, the demeanor of Ivan were enough to unmask the most cunning traitor.

The effect on Clover Phil was magical.

He started back with the countenance of a guilty wretch, and even Horseshoe Hank saw that the bolt had struck home.

"By Jove! Thet war a hard blow, cap'n!" cried the pard.

"What! do you believe it?" and quick as a flash Clover Phil whirled upon his friend.

"Ther ar'r hit somewhar, Clover; it made you stagger—"

"Thet's enough! I'll begin with you, Horseshoe!"

The menaced pard threw up his hand, the pistol gripped by his swarthy fingers darted toward the postmaster's head, but just then another hand shot upward, and fire flashed in his face.

Quick as Horseshoe Hank was to defend his life, Clover Phil was quicker, and from the jet of fire the confederate spun across the glassy surface of the flat rock, to disappear in the twinkling of an eye over the edge of the chasm!

"That's one!" fell from the killer's lips. "I'm thet chap what wrote that letter! Now, Ivan, I'll tend ter yer case. Wheel an' jump!"

There was no response.

Clover Phil uttered a startling cry.

The rock was occupied no longer!

CHAPTER VII.

IVAN'S LOVE.

It was barely possible that Horseshoe Hank in falling from the rock had struck Ivan and carried him over with him, and that the smoke of the revolver had prevented Clover Phil from witnessing the catastrophe.

The shooting postmaster of Dead Line City looked nonplused when he discovered that Ivan was no longer on the rock.

"What! has that youngster gone back to camp to unmask me thar?" parted his lips. "I should have dropped him first an' then whirled upon Horseshoe, but I didn't think he would take any stock in Ivan's charge. Yes, I'm the traitor an' the captain, an' I ar' goin' ter win in

this mountain game. I'll go back an' see. I guess I'm able ter hold my own ag'in' a boy."

Clover Phil knew that he had finished Horseshoe Hank, the man who but a moment before had served as his tool in the scheme against Ivan, and confident that he was a match for the young Mazepa, he turned on his heel and went back toward the camp among the hills.

He found the place in an indescribable uproar.

There were five men there who, with many an oath and threat of future vengeance, had just explained to an exasperated crowd the meaning of the rapid shots whose echoes had come down from the elevated trails.

Each of the five was shot through the right hand, and a regular howl of fury had soared starward when they said that the shootist was the renowned devil, Captain Clutch, or, as the Dead Liners knew him best—Captain Theobald.

"Whar's Red Scar?" demanded Clover Phil. "He led you up to the Injun's trail. Did Captain Clutch shoot at his head?"

"We didn't stop ter hunt Red Scar," was the answer. "He started arter Cap'n Clutch mad as a rattler, we heard another shot, but we didn't investigate."

The five right hands were dressed in the light of several torches, and their enraged owners swore new oaths against the man from Taos.

All this time, there lurked in the depths of Clover Phil's eyes a gleam of satisfaction, and whenever he glanced at the bronzed surgeons at work, a faint smile came to the corners of his mouth.

"They're gettin' paid back," he said to himself. "They don't suspect me, but if I let Ivan get his work in, thar'll be ther deuce ter pay in camp. Whar is the boy?"

Clover Phil turned as he put the question to himself, and searched the camp with a pair of eager eyes.

All at once he caught sight of a person who took him forward with lengthy strides.

"The Taos Tiger shows his teeth, Princess," he said, halting before this person who was the waif of the wagon, and gazing down into her eyes.

"I saw the five come back," was the reply. "They will have to shoot left handed for awhile."

"Not for long, Princess. We'll corral Cap'n Clutch an' his Comanche spy before a great while, then we'll hev targets which no man can miss. But I want to say, that for all you did to-night, you hev'n't lost the respect of the Dead Line pards. You saw fit to put in for Ivan, an' I don't blame you, seein' that you two ar' friends."

Did Clover Phil see the young girl start, and did he notice the flush that stole across her temples, rendering her more beautiful than ever?

"We are friends. I do not believe him the traitor of the camp. He has enemies, and they showed their hands to-night," she said.

"That's so, Princess, an' Red Scar Dave got settled by Cap'n Clutch for his smartness."

"I ruther guess not, Clover Phil."

The postmaster wheeled as though a rattlesnake had sounded his warning behind him.

"I'm still on this side of eternity," continued the deep bass voice which had startled Clover Phil. "The boys hev got but one good hand, but I've got two. Even Cap'n Clutch misses sometimes, though the furrow his bullet plowed along my cheek speaks of a closer shave than even Red Scar wants. What's thet ye war sayin' about ther Taos hyena settlin' me for my smartness?"

Clover Phil, who had not recovered from his surprise, continued to gaze at the mountain hercules, who coolly confronted him with a heavy six-shooter in his right hand.

There was fury in Red Scar's eyes, and he looked every inch just what he was, a mad-dened desperado.

Princess Pet saw that unless Clover Phil weakened a terrible encounter was imminent.

Not more than three yards separated the two Dead Liners.

Would they come together?

"Keep it to yerself, then," suddenly cried Red Scar. "We'll compare notes some other time. I'm back hyer ter see arter the boys. We didn't see Velvet Foot, but we found Cap'n Clutch! You hev'n't done anything with Ivan, the Jonah I left in yer hands; of course not! The young skunk will soon know thet I am back!"

With a parting look which breathed contempt and hatred for Clover Phil, Red Scar Dave started off, followed by the eyes of the girl.

"Let him go, Princess," said the postmaster,

suddenly clutching her wrist as she seemed about to follow the boss of Dead Line. "He dar'n't hurt anybody who belongs to camp. I'll stand by you an' Ivan; for from this moment Red Scar an' Clover Phil ar' open foes! I tell you, girl, Dead Line City will never be rebuilt by the pards that reared it afore; but the pards themselves still live, an' woe to the galoot who crosses one ov the lot. You don't like Red Scar?"

"No."

"Thet's good!" and Clover Phil smiled as he looked down into the wagon-waif's white face. "Something might occur thet will deprive you ov Ivan's friendship—"

"Nothing but death can take that from me."

"Wal, death, then. Life is almighty on-sart'in in this kentry, Princess Pet. Should the boy's enemies trump his ace with the revolver, which ov us will you choose for a friend—me or Red Scar Dave?"

The girl made no reply; but attempted to break from the speaker's grasp.

"No; you don't get away until you hev decided," said Clover Phil, with firmness. "I want this question settled now! Something is goin' ter happen."

"To Ivan?"

"Perhaps. As I hev said, life is oncertain hyer."

Instantly the black eyes of the girl flashed fire.

"Let them harm him if they dare!" she exclaimed, facing Clover Phil. "They forget that I am his frierd, that strange circumstances have linked us together. They ought to have seen that we would love one another—"

"What's thet?" and the ruffian's clutch tightened at the girl's wrist. "You don't mean that you really love Ivan, thet—"

"What did I say?"

"You said that the camp ought ter hev seen from the first thet you an' ther boy would fall in love."

"That's what I meant!" cried Princess Pet, proudly.

"I've been one ov the fools, then!"

The girl could not repress a smile.

"Didn't you see it?" she asked.

"No."

"You know it now."

Clover Phil shut his hand and ground his teeth.

"Thet settles Ivan's fate," he muttered under his breath, then he exclaimed aloud:

"You've got a right ter stand by him ef thet's the case. We oughtn't ter find fault with you for thet. But whar is Ivan?"

"I don't know."

The next moment Princess Pet was free again, and Clover Phil had stepped back, a thundercloud of passion darkening his brow.

"I'm goin' ter see what mischief Red Scar intends ter stir up in the camp," he said throwing a glance at the girl. "So you love Ivan, eh? Wal, thet's all right. I won't trouble you to tell me who you prefer next ter the boy. We'll settle thet question some other time."

"We'll settle it now!" exclaimed the girl.

"I can answer you in a moment. I have but one choice and I have chosen Ivan."

"Pshaw! I don't mean that," laughed Clover Phil disgusted. "Who's your next choice? thet's what I want ter know. You must choose 'twixt Red Scar Dave an' me."

"When?"

"Almighty soon; perhaps within the next twenty-four hours."

"Which means that Ivan is not safe?"

"Take it as it strikes you!" was the retort.

"With Red Scar an' more than half the camp ag'in' ther youngster, I can't answer for his safety. Then, Cap'n Clutch has sworn to wipe Dead Line out ov existence, root an' branch, an' thet also includes Ivan, yer friend. Don't you see that within twenty-four hours you may hev ter choose another? Now, ov us two which one shell it be?"

"Neither!" and the lips of the girl closed firmly behind her answer to the snappings of her sparkling eyes. "After Ivan I have no choice, and never will I choose between two mountain vultures!"

Clover Phil suddenly recoiled.

"Don't get too brave!" he exclaimed. "This is still Dead Line ef ther shanties ar' smokin' ruins. Two vultures, eh? When the time comes for you ter choose ag'in, if you don't select Clover Phil, you may wish thet you hed died in thet lost Conestoga. The boy—Ivan the spy—is already doomed!"

"By you?" cried Princess Pet, and she came toward the postmaster of Dead Line City with fearless mien and steady step. "By you and

the desperadoes you control? Touch him and give me continued freedom if you dare! Remember that you have taught me how to use the weapons which avenge wrongs in Colorado. I am but a girl, but the blood of a man who feared nothing courses through my veins. Fate brought me years ago to the human tigers' den called Dead Line, and it has protected me through thick and thin. Beware! Clover Phil. Dark will be the day to you on which you attempt to make me choose between you and Red Scar Dave. Better the love of that king of desperadoes—Captain Clutch!"

"You'd better look out, Princess," laughed Clover Phil. "The Taos Tiger knows a pretty girl when he sees one, and he's heard ov the waif ov Dead Line City. Look out, I tell you. Cap'n Clutch is in the neighborhood!" and laughing still, at his own words, Clover Phil left Princess Pet to her own reflections.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CLUTCHES OF CAPTAIN CLUTCH.

THE morning that broke after the most exciting night in the history of Dead Line City, found a mad and, to some extent, a dejected crowd of roughs in the camp which had been pitched among the mountains.

It was easily seen that the pards of Dead Line had divided into two factions, one of which was under the control of Clover Phil, while the other, the smallest of the two divisions, looked to Red Scar Dave for orders.

This state of affairs had been brought about by the hates of two men.

For a long time prior to the opening of our romance, a sort of secret rivalry had existed between Red Scar and Clover Phil.

While on the surface they were on good terms, underneath they hated one another with great cordiality, and there were a few of the shrewd outsiders who traced this hatred to Princess Pet, the waif of Dead Line.

It was said that Clover Phil had set his head on obtaining the girl he had helped to find half-starved and abandoned in an old Conestoga some years before, but that he had never pressed his suit because of Red Scar Dave, who had appointed himself one of the young girl's guardians.

But now that she had professed her preference for Ivan, a waif like herself, now that she had fetched matters to a crisis, the wild loves and hates of the Colorado rivals had burst forth with intense fury, and they were determined to sweep everything before them.

Of course the five men shot in the right hand clung to Red Scar Dave.

During the night their dare-devil leader had poisoned several more minds against Clover Phil, so that when morning came, the postmaster-desperado found himself with fewer friends than he had bargained for.

Strange to say, Ivan had not put in an appearance.

What had become of the young Jonah of Camp Vengeance?—for with such an appellation had the mountain resort been christened.

No one had seen him since the flash of Clover Phil's revolver, which tumbled Horseshoe Hank from the flat rock, and headlong down into the chasm.

Clover Phil had hoped until almost daylight that Horseshoe had carried Ivan with him to death, but an examination of the bottom of the canyon had disappointed him.

Nobody saw the ex-postmaster creep like a specter down to the gulch and search it until he found but one body lying at the foot of the wall—the corpse of Horseshoe Hank, with a bullet-hole in the forehead, and a pistol still clutched in the dead hand.

Ivan had not fallen from the cliff, and so Clover Phil was forced to desert the place to look elsewhere for the youth who was liable to brand him a traitor and Captain Clutch's spy before all the pards.

"Daylight will show me the young hot head," he said to himself, but daybreak refused to accommodate him, and Ivan was still missing.

There was a good deal of tough language used whenever the wounded pards glanced at the bandaged hands which they owed to Captain Clutch.

They were in no mood to take a joke, and the most hilarious tenants of Camp Vengeance were soon forced to give up their merriment at their expense, for revolvers were drawn at the first witticism.

Clover Phil and Red Scar Dave took care to avoid one another, as if neither wished to hasten a collision.

Princess Pet saw through it all, and deter-

mined to give neither of the rivals a chance to afflict her with their jealousies and hates.

If Captain Clutch had applied the torch to Dead Line, he had not completed his work of vengeance.

Clover Phil, the self confessed traitor, knew he had not, and all the rest believed that he still lurked in the vicinity, watching for another opportunity to show the tiger's claws beneath the velvet.

Clover Phil watched constantly for Ivan.

Why didn't the boy come back to give him the chance he wanted? And what kept him away?

"I've waited one day," he growled, as the sun went down; "an' I'll be hanged if I stand it another. Ivan won't come, so I'll go to Ivan."

He stood at the edge of the camp, and one of his hands held the bridle-rein of a young horse that champed his bit impatient to be off.

"I have nothing to fear from the captain," he went on in the same tone, "an' he will help me find the boy. It's to our interest to find him. He more than suspects who I am. Red Scar's attempt to make a traitor out of him failed, an' now the boy might see fit to call me Captain Clutch's man in presence of the bull camp. Then, he stands between me an' Princess Pet. For that reason alone I would hunt him, if necessary, to the ends of the earth!"

With an agile leap he landed himself on the back of the horse as he finished, and threw a sharp look toward Camp Vengeance ere he touched the eager young animal with the spur.

Away went the horse as if shot from a monster catapult, and the next instant he was bearing Clover Phil over the mountain trail.

Did the postmaster of Dead Line know where to look for Ivan?

Five minutes after his start he drew rein beside a huge rock and slid from the saddle.

"A mail-bag with two compartments," he observed with a smile, as he ran one hand under one corner of the stone and felt something on which his swarthy fingers closed.

"We'll see what the captain says," he said, straightening and producing a match which ignited without producing a report. "Aha! it is from the old fellow himself!"

Clover Phil soon unfolded the communication he had taken from beneath the boulder, and two minutes later he had mastered the following sentences:

"PARD:—So far we are doing admirably. The nest is burned and the vultures have taken to the mountains. Stand by me and we'll succeed. You played your part coolly last night. Nobody suspects you, but look out. That accursed Comanche is in the neighborhood.

"THE CAPTAIN."

"I'm not afraid ov that Injun," said Clover Phil as he closed the letter and crushed it in his hand. "They call him a red detective, but pshaw! he never ran anybody down. I know he's around, captain, but ju-t now I want the youngster. The danger to our future plans lies in him, not in Velvet Foot, the Comanche. I needn't answer this letter; no reply is required. Yes, I'll look out for Velvet Foot, but not that I fear him, for I do not."

At that very moment a pair of eyes that glittered like a serpent's were not ten feet away from Clover Phil.

The boulder was all that separated him from his watcher, and when the Dead Line postmaster again mounted, a human figure, naked to the waist, glided around the stone and darted toward Camp Vengeance.

If he could run like a deer he could also glide over the trail without making the least noise, and nobody heard him enter the camp a few minutes later.

For fear of showing Captain Clutch where to shoot should he come back to resume the work of vengeance, not a light shone within the boundaries of the camp, and the shadows of the mountain walls that rose all around it seemed to render objects doubly indistinct.

Catlike the invader of the desperadoes' camp glided hither and thither, with eyes that took in everything.

If Velvet Foot was a detective, he was certainly playing the role to perfection.

Now he seemed a darker shadow against a rock, now the rock itself.

All at once Princess Pet, who reclined against a tree wrapped in thought and wondering what had become of Ivan, started as a hand soft as velvet touched her wrist.

An ejaculation reached her lips as she turned and looked into the face of the Comanche.

"No speak, Princess," said the Indian detective. "Where is the white boy?"

"You should know, not I," was the quick response. "I have not left the camp all day, but have waited here for him. You have come from without, and I look to you for information."

The girl saw before she finished that the Comanche was perplexed, and that he knew nothing of Ivan.

"When did white boy leave?"

"Last night."

"In a hurry?"

"Yes."

"Will Princess tell Velvet Foot all?"

"I will, but not here."

With his hand at the girl's wrist the Comanche led her from the camp, and neither spoke until more than four hundred yards from the pards of Dead Line.

"In first place," he said, turning upon Princess Pet as he halted, "Princess hates Velvet Foot for coming with Captain Clutch last night."

"No," cried the wagon-wail. "I trust you. You are my friend and, besides Ivan, the only one I have."

A gleam of satisfaction lit up the dark eyes of the Comanche brave, and he drew his splendid figure to its full height before her.

"Velvet Foot hates the Taos Tiger," he exclaimed. "His trail follows the one the captain makes, but he knows it not. The Comanche will reach the end of the hunt by an' by. Let Princess trust him. He saw her before last night, he knew her father who fought the Comanches years ago when they sent their arrows into his wagon. Let the white girl look at Velvet Foot. He is strong, he has an eagle's eye in his head, he is a giant among his red people."

"Heavens! what a target!" grated a voice that sent a thrill through the young girl's frame. "As you hate me so cordially, trailing hound, I'll settle all accounts with you where you stand!"

A human figure sprang into the trail as the last words sounded, a pistol-shot rung clearly out, and as Velvet Foot, the red detective, reeled away with a cry of pain, a hand clutched the girl's arm.

She recoiled but could not escape.

"You're in the hands of Captain Clutch, my beauty!" hissed the victor.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE TIGER'S CLAWS.

CAPTAIN CLUTCH!

Princess Pet could not look without a shiver into the triumphant eyes of the man whose fingers encircled her arm and held her fast.

Clover Phil had told her with a laugh only a little while before that the Taos Tiger had heard of her beauty, and that she would see him soon enough.

And now she was his captive, and the Indian who had drawn her from Camp Vengeance to impart a secret of some kind lay motionless, if not dead, only a few feet away!

"Warn't looking for the captain, eh?" laughed the girl's captor. "He always turns up when nobody expects him; that's been his habit for fifteen years. They told me about the Dead Line flower a long time ago, an' now I behold you for the first time. You ar' a daisy an' no mistake, girl. The boys had it right when they painted your picture."

The girl did not reply but faced the desperado in silence, but eager to see to what lengths his words would carry him.

"They tell me that the boy ran off last night," Captain Clutch went on.

"What boy?" exclaimed the girl.

"Ah, don't you know?—the youngster Red Scar accused of treason."

"He is not in camp."

"I thought so! Got afraid ov a rope an' v-mosed the ranch!" laughed the Taos sport. Instantly the eyes of the captive flashed.

"Ivan is no coward!" she cried resentfully.

"The threat of a rope and Red Scar's lie did not drive him away."

"What did, then?"

"He will answer when he comes back."

"When will that be?"

"When he wishes to return."

"Do not be so fast, Princess Pet. Ivan belongs to Dead Line which has been, but is not now. Haven't you heard the men hyenas back in the camp say that I hate everything that belonged to that accursed city?"

"I have heard them say that they hate you."

"Of course! Wal, Ivan is one of the Dead Line pards. He wasn't on hand when they hus-

tled Pistol Pocket out of existence with torch, an' revolver, but he belongs to the gang now, an' that's enough! You are goin' with me now, but not back to Camp Vengeance."

The young girl hesitated, but the fingers of Captain Clutch tightened around her arm, and almost lifted her from the ground.

"Men haven't misjudged you," she said. "They tell me that you are a tiger in Taos—"

"Wal, I should ejaculate!" laughed the ruffian. "I'm the head animal ov thet menagerie ov wonders. Don't look at me thet way, girl. Ef eyes war arrers, you'd shoot to kill!"

Princess Pet made no answer, but shut her lips firmly and permitted the Taos Tiger to bear her to a horse that all the while had waited for him two hundred feet from the scene of her capture.

"Look hyer, Princess," suddenly cried the sport, wheeling upon the girl and transfixing her with his gleaming black eyes. "Be tractable an' we'll get along without a jar; give me trouble an' I'll be rude. It all lies with you. I didn't come up from my den to war on women. I came hyer ter fight men—tigers like myself—but I never go back on beauty when I run across a sample like yourself. Between me an' the hyenas ov Dead Line City there is a war which only death can stop. I've a friend back thar in camp—a spy, who has kept me posted for five years. You couldn't go back an' lay your finger on him in twenty guesses. He has covered his tracks so well that the most suspicious galoot ov Dead Line has never suspected him. Ivan is not the traitor; it never entered into his head ter betray his pards. Red Scar knows it, too, but he attempted a ten-strike for another purpose. Do you think you could pick out my pard—eh, Princess?"

Leaning forward, Captain Clutch gazed into the girl's face with a confident leer.

"Blurt out his name if you know it!" he went on. "Aha! you never knew till now that I had a pard in Dead Line."

"I knew there was a traitor there," said the young girl calmly.

"What?"

"Yes, a traitor—not a pard!"

"Name him!"

But the lips of Princess Pet did not unclose.

"You don't know him, or you would speak!" cried the Taos sport. "Remain with me an' you'll see him. Last night I gave Dead Line to the flames; last night I shot Red Scar's pards through the hands. Before the week ends there won't be a man left who can boast that he helped to destroy Pistol Pocket at Captain Theobald's band! This is mountain vengeance, girl. Here to-day, gone to-morrow! By the stars that shine above us! I will spread a feast for the Colorado vultures that will tickle their maws. You shall see it all."

He ceased abruptly, seized the girl around the waist, and sat her on the back of the horse almost before she could speak.

What had startled the Taos Tiger?

"I didn't hear a footstep, Princess," he laughed as he landed in the saddle behind her. "I take these spells sometimes, an' one unacquainted with me would think that I have just caught an Indian's step, but no. Velvet Foot is dead enough, an' no one is near to snatch from Captain Clutch the prize he has just won!"

Held firmly by the left arm of the sport, Princess Pet soon found herself borne along the trail at a smart gallop which was taking her further and further from the camp of the burned out toughs.

Her thoughts naturally went back to the men she had left behind, to Clover Phil and Red Scar Dave and their jealousies, to the wounded men who had roughly thanked her for attention to their hurts, and to Ivan.

Strong ties bound her to the Boy Mazeppa of Colorado.

An unaccountable fate had thrown them together; one had ridden into Dead Line tied to an Indian horse, the other had been carried thither from an old wagon whose arrow-pierced horses had fallen dead in their harness.

Was it strange that the two young people thus thrown together should grow up with feelings akin to love. That their companionship should make them more than friends?

Red Scar Dave might have surmised this, and long before the burning of Dead Line City, Clover Phil should have opened his eyes to the true state of affairs.

Ivan had not left the country for good; at least Princess Pet thought he had not.

She had told Captain Clutch proudly that the lyncher's rope had not frightened him off.

She believed that an important mission of some kind had taken the youth away, and her

only fear regarding him as she rode the starlit trail in the claws of the Taos Tiger, was that he would reappear at Camp Vengeance and walk into a trap set for him by Clover Phil and Red Scar Dave.

Her thoughts were rudely intruded upon by the sudden halting of Captain Clutch's horse, and Princess Pet looked forward, fully expecting to see the handsome sport covered by a rifle.

But she was agreeably disappointed for the trail was clear ahead as far as she could see, and the captain had stopped for a purpose which was to her a profound mystery.

"Princess," he said, "I am compelled to blindfold you."

She gave him a quick look.

"It will only last for a few minutes," he went on. "When you see again you can inspect one of the numerous dens of the Taos Tiger."

At the same time he produced a large silk handkerchief and began to fold it in a proper manner for blindfolding.

"Now, girl, we'll cover those pretty eyes," he said suddenly, placing the handkerchief over the girl's brilliant orbs before she could remonstrate, and the next moment he had knotted the silk behind her head.

Of course Princess Pet submitted, and when the operation of blindfolding was completed Captain Clutch ordered the horse on again.

"Halt! Lift a hand or draw a weapon, Captain Clutch, and the burning of Dead Line will be avenged!"

Instantly the horse stood still in the trail and the girl, though she could not see the speaker, murmured a name that chased the hot blood swiftly through her veins.

"Ivan!" she said. "Heaven has sent him in the hour of need!"

If Princess Pet did not see the person who had appeared so suddenly on the scene, there was one interested individual who did—Captain Clutch!

A frown dark as a thundercloud came to his brow, his eyes blazed with madness, and the threat of his confronter was the only force that could arrest the hand that glided toward his revolver.

In an instant the "boss tiger of the Taos Menagerie" had recognized the man on his trail.

He saw the youth who leaned forward in his saddle with a cocked rifle at his right shoulder, and Captain Clutch had a splendid opportunity to gaze into the barrel of the weapon, for it was leveled at his head.

"Drop the girl gently and go back," continued Ivan, for it was the young Mazeppa. "I don't like a hair on your head, captain. If you want to live to fight the banded pards of Dead Line, release your captive and go back."

Under his black mustache the Taos desperado bit his lip till the blood ran.

"From the boy?—from Ivan?" the girl heard him hiss. "What! Captain Theobald, the Taos Tiger, give up the fairest jewel in Colorado because a boy says, 'Give her up?'"

"You had better, captain," whispered Princess Pet. "I know Ivan better than you do. Refuse to obey him, and he will kill."

There was no reply.

"I count three, captain," came over the Colorado rifle.

"Confound it! take the girl!" growled the Taos sport.

As he finished, he lifted Pet from the saddle, and leaned over as if to lower her to the ground, but instead of setting her on the trail, he suddenly drew her against the horse, threw himself forward on the steed's neck, and then, with a yell that would have done credit to a Comanche, sent home the spurs, and shot like an arrow straight at Ivan, the Colorado Mazeppa!

It was the work of a second, the shrewd trick of the shrewdest ruffian south of Deadwood.

For a moment it seemed as if the two horses would collide, but Captain Clutch's shot past Ivan by the breadth of a hair, and before the youth could touch the trigger, the wily rough was thundering down the trail.

"Your blood for that trick, Captain Clutch!" cried Ivan.

Recovering in an instant, he wheeled and attempted to cover the Taos sport, but the flicker starlight was against him.

But all at once the young Mazeppa's rifle cracked, to be followed by a wild shriek far down the mountain road.

"My God!" burst from Ivan's throat. "Madness made me press the trigger, and the ball has found Princess Pet's heart!"

The sentence ended in a wail of agony, he seemed to reel in the saddle, and the rifle which

had wrought such terrible work, he threw disgustfully away.

"If I have killed that girl," he cried, "may the wrath of Heaven hound me to doom!"

CHAPTER X.

BACK TO THE OLD DEN.

HALF an hour after the encounter between Ivan and Captain Clutch, a horse and his rider made their appearance on one of the elevated trails of the mountain, about five miles from the place.

"No success," said the individual in the saddle, in no good humor. "The captain carried her clear off, and I am baffled. If my bullet took her life, may fate make me a vagabond on the face of the earth. I did not intend to shoot, but rage made me give the trigger too much pressure, and after the unfortunate shot came back the girl's wild cry."

Ivan was riding slowly back toward Camp Vengeance.

He had spurred his horse after Captain Clutch after the unintentional shot, and though he had searched the mountains well, he had lost the trail, and Princess Pet's fate was involved in much mystery.

Why go back to the camp, now?

Did he not know that Clover Phil hated him, and that Red Scar Dave wanted his blood?

"I haven't given Pet up," he went on, speaking his thoughts aloud; "neither have I done with those hyenas who constantly sniff blood. Clover Phil dropped Horseshoe Hank because he saw that my words about the traitor of Dead Line had raised certain suspicions. I got away in the smoke of his revolver, not that I feared the wretch, for fear him I do not; but a mission took me miles away, and now I am going back."

Back to Camp Vengeance, leaving Princess Pet dead or alive, he knew not which, in the clutches of the man from Taos.

Ivan knew that his action looked ungrateful, but he resolutely kept his horse's head turned toward the rendezvous among the mountains, and he seemed eager to ride into the lair he had left the night previous.

He could not look far ahead for the uncertain light of the stars; therefore, he could not see the human figure that crept with difficulty up a mountain trail, and which had the movements of a wounded snake.

Inch by inch, and stopping here and there for a brief spell to gain new breath, the crippled person made slow headway.

All the time there was a mad light in the creeper's keen black eyes, which increased in intensity as he seemed to near a certain goal.

"The Taos Tiger shot Velvet Foot. The Comanche trailer will not forget him for that."

These two sentences more than once parted the crawler's lips; he said no more, as if they were enough.

At last he crawled to the edge of a cliff, and looked over the fringe of bush and rock.

"The white dogs of the camp are quarreling among themselves," he said, after listening for a moment. "The traitor of Dead Line and the man who accused the white boy are growling like hungry wolves. Velvet Foot will lie here and listen awhile."

The Indian shot by Captain Clutch, as we have witnessed, seemed to take delight in hearing the loud words that reached his ears from the camp a hundred feet below.

He could not see the occupants of the place, but his keen ears almost instantly located them with correctness, and lying on the ground, listening eagerly to every word, he forgot the memento of Captain Clutch's rage which he carried in the shape of a wound which would have killed many men.

"I don't quarrel with any man," came up from below. "You accused the boy, and couldn't prove a word of the charge. Now you stand there and fling the epithet of traitor into my teeth. Now, where is your proof?"

"In yer own pocket, ef you hev'n't torn it up," was the answer. "That paper which I said I found whar Cap'n Clutch had dropped it was never written by Ivan. I knowed it from the first, an' so did you when you read it in ther presence ov ther hull camp. You know who wrote that letter; you know who told Cap'n Theobald that the time fer vengeance hed come; you know who hes been Dead Line's traitor. Clover Phil, I'm no coward. By Jove! the man what ever saw Red Scar Dave go back on a charge doesn't tread the ground. I stand hyer an' call you ther traitor ov Dead Line—the man who came among us in ther pay ov Cap'n Theobald!"

These were words whose import was not to be

mistaken, and they were spoken in a tone of voice that carried emphasis on each syllable.

The rivals of Dead Line City stood in the starlight, with a space of only ten feet between them.

Behind Red Scar Dave seven men had planted themselves, and five of these worthies carried their right hands in slings.

Clover Phil had the bulk of the camp at his back.

In the division that had taken place at sundown, the "best men" of Camp Vengeance had arrayed themselves on the side of the postmaster.

And now the two factions stood face to face, with bronzed hands at the butts of deadly six-shooters, and eyes that looked rage to eyes again, ready to begin the deadly contest at the uplifting of a finger.

Red Scar Dave had not minced words, but had branded Clover Phil a traitor to Dead Line, and was willing to back his assertion with physical courage and terrible determination.

To the Indian lying at the edge of the lofty trail it was a case of dog eat dog.

The Comanche knew both of the contestants. "Let them tear one another up," he said, with a faint smile. "It will help the boy."

Silence followed the utterance of Red Scar's last words.

"You first accused the boy, Ivan," said Clover Phil, "now you turn on me."

"The first time I lied, that war all. Now I shoot straight at ther mark."

"An' I say you lie!" roared the postmaster.

"With twenty-nine men at yer back," laughed Red Scar Dave, derisively. "I've got a hospital behind me, but that's no difference. Walk to ther line I drew a while ago an' tee it ef ye dare! Colorado, with all its mountains, is too small for Red Scar Dave an' Clover Phil. From handlin' letters, step forward an' handle ther knife. Let's hev it out before ther hull camp. I'm not afraid ter meet Captain Clutch's pard!"

If Velvet Foot could have taken in this scene, he would have seen Clover Phil put up his revolver and whip out a ten-inch bowie.

"When my hand goes up!" he sent back over his shoulder in a whisper to the men behind him, "don't forget the signal. When I lift my hand, open with yer six shooters an' riddle every mother's son ov 'em."

Clover Phil ceased and advanced toward Red Scar Dave.

"Do we need a torch?" asked the boss of Dead Line.

"No! Let the stars furnish light for our tussle," answered Clover Phil.

"All right."

Red Scar Dave moved forward as he spoke and all saw that the rivals of Camp Vengeance would meet at the line the bully had drawn on the ground with the point of his bowie a few minutes before.

A personal conflict was inevitable.

"The boy knows who the traitor is," hissed Red Scar Dave.

"He wouldn't say so if he did," was the quick response. "Ivan would never confirm the words of the galoot who attempted to swear his neck into a noose last night. Ready I am, Red Scar," and then Clover Phil suddenly lowered his voice. "After this tussle Princess Pet will not have to choose between the rivals of Dead Line City!" he finished.

Another stride brought the two men so close together that their toes almost touched.

Up went Red Scar's bowie, and his left arm was raised to a level with his heart for the purpose of defending that organ from the blade clutched in his enemy's right hand.

All at once the twenty-nine men who occupied the spot just vacated by Clover Phil raised their revolvers.

They were waiting for the signal, dead shots all after dark, as well as at noonday.

"Now, drive ahead!" grated Red Scar. "After this fight, Cap'n Clutch won't have so many enemies!"

"Nor Colorado so many fools if you kill one another," said a voice so near and distinct that the mountain rivals instinctively whirled upon the speaker.

"The boy, oy George!" exclaimed a voice before either Clover Phil or Red Scar recognized the person in their presence.

Yes, the boy Ivan!

He had reached the spot with the noiseless tread of a ghost; no eye had seen him until the sentence just recorded fell from his tongue to the utter astonishment of all.

"Thar he is!" cried Clover Phil. "Thar's the lad you tried ter swear into a noose," and he pointed at Ivan while he looked at his rival.

"I needn't tell him that Camp Vengeance stands divided. I have twenty-nine at my back, while but seven stand by you, Red Scar. He can see all this with his own eyes. Hating you as he does, and seeing the drift of public opinion in camp, let him say who he thinks is Captain Clutch's pard."

"Out with it, Ivan!" cried Red Scar Dave. "I war ag'in' ye last night an' I don't like yer any too well now. Any way ye answer you ar' likely ter get inter trouble. Shoot it out an' show yer grit!"

Instead of shrinking from the ordeal, Ivan kept his ground, and his stature seemed to increase.

Keen eyes like his could see the uplifted revolvers of the twenty-nine on one side, and the bandaged hands and tigerish looks of the seven on the other.

Yet he did not hesitate.

"I know the traitor of Dead Line. He is the man who sent Horseshoe Hank to the bottom of the canyon with a bullet in his head, the man we have called Clover Phil!"

A devilish leer lit up Red Scar's eyes.

"That's what Ivan says!" he cried.

"Men of Dead Line, cover that young liar!" And Clover Phil's finger described the youth as he glanced at the twenty-nine. "He has come back to Camp Vengeance to perish with a falsehood on his lips. He shall die—"

"Great heavens! a shootin'-star!" was the startling cry that interrupted the postmaster of Dead Line.

Instantly all eyes were turned aloft, and behold! a ball of fire, as large as a man's head, and blazing furiously, was seen descending upon the camp as if from the skies.

The descending meteor held the whole crowd spellbound, and when it struck the ground and blazed up, throwing a light upon the scene, several started back with exclamations of amazement.

"Star be hanged! that's only a bunch of burnin' grass!" suddenly cried Clover Phil. "Somebody up yonder is tryin' ter play a trick on us. Don't drop your revolvers, but cover the boy. And when I lift my hand, make a sieve out of him!"

Then Clover Phil stepped back and threw a quick look aloft.

"Thanks for yer light, whoever ye ar'!" he cried in loud tones. "It shows my mountain daisies whar ter shoot. Now not one bullet will go astray!"

The answer came from above in an unexpected shape.

It came in the sharp, whip-like reports of two revolvers, and two of the dark-faced men at Clover Phil's back dropped their uplifted weapons and fell dead in their tracks!

"Put out the light!" thundered a voice.

There was an oath and a bound on the part of Clover Phil, and the following second he landed on the burning grass and crushed its life out under his heavy boots.

CHAPTER XI.

THE RED-SKIN'S TRAIL.

THIS sudden ending of the quarrel between the Dead Line rivals startled the occupants of Camp Vengeance, and more than one man recoiled aghast.

As for Ivan, he stepped back a pace and laid his hand on his revolver.

"Don't you know who's up thar?" vociferated Red Scar Dave. "That boss tiger from Taos has come back!"

The five men shot through the right hand set up a howl for revenge, and darted toward the nearest pathway that ascended to the cliffs above.

"Don't be fools," and Red Scar threw himself before the impetuous five. "You hunted him once afore an' found him. Then, it war a bullet through the hand, now it will be a hole in the head. Keep off! This time he shot two of Clover Phil's pards."

If Red Scar Dave could have gone up to the trail at that moment he would have found the Comanche brave still clutching the pistols with which he had sent two of the toughs to their final reward.

He was lying on his breast with his face turned toward the camp in the pass, and with eagerness mingled with revenge in the depths of his eyes.

Suddenly there came up to him the voice of Clover Phil, and if the fireball had continued to burn, he would have seen the postmaster shaking his clinched hand at the trail across which he was lying.

"You daren't show yerself, Cap'n Clutch! You ar' ther meanest man in Colorado, a cow-

ard an' a skunk! Don't think that Dead Line is harmless just because the shanties ar' in ashes. You'll find yerself ther worst mistaken man on earth ef ye do! Oh, you dirty galoot! Come down hyer an' do er die like a man!"

"Captain Clutch!" grinned Velvet Foot.

"Clover Phil don't know who I am. What! go down there in my condition? Not much. I'm in no condition to fight the wolves of Dead Line, and a fight down there might make it bad for the boy."

The Comanche did not reply to Clover Phil's epithets and excited sentences, but dragged himself back from the edge of the cliff.

He looked like a person who has just gained a victory of importance in which also he has gratified a revenge.

"I've saved the boy," he ejaculated. "My fire-ball landed among the men of Dead Line in the nick of time. It showed me the men who had covered Ivan with their revolvers, and two of them dropped when I shot. Ivan was foolish for going back to camp. He must not cross such men as Red Scar and Clover Phil."

It was true that Ivan had been saved by the Indian's fire-ball and by the two death shots he had fired in rapid succession.

In another minute Clover Phil would have delivered the signal which would have put an end to the youth's career, for the twenty-nine pards were only too willing to shoot him where he stood.

He had also broken up the encounter between the rivals of the camp, but this was an event which was liable to take place again at the first opportunity.

Velvet Foot managed to move slowly and with pain from the spot from which he had interfered.

Captain Clutch, in capturing Princess Pet had given the red-skin a terrible wound, but the iron constitution of the Indian, coupled to his iron will was in his favor.

He ground his teeth till they cracked, and passed on with his eyes snapping fire.

One hundred yards from the spot from whence he had launched the blazing ball, Velvet Foot stopped and turned in the shadow of a rock with both revolvers at full cock.

"They've come up from below, have they?" he hissed in an undertone. "They think they are going to run on to Captain Clutch, but instead they have found Velvet Foot, the Comanche! Come on, my wolves of the mountain. Velvet Foot will creep no further. He has halted to wait for your scalps. Creep forward to your death, for the pistols of the Indian are ready to seal your doom."

The approach of some one had fallen upon the Comanche's ear, and with every sense on the alert, he now waited for, as he supposed, the vengeance-hunters of the camp below.

"What! Ivan, the boy!" he suddenly exclaimed as he caught sight of the sole figure that came in sight. "Does he also hunt Captain Clutch? Well, he shall find Velvet Foot."

A moment later a noise made by the Indian's lips caused a figure to halt in the trail several feet away, and a revolver was lifted as the lock sent forth its warning click.

"It is Velvet Foot, not the Taos Tiger," smiled the Comanche.

"You? Is there any difference?"

"That is for Ivan to say."

The youth came forward while the red-skin straightened against the huge rock at his back.

"Did you kill those two men awhile ago?" he asked.

"Why not? They had covered you."

"Yes. I will own that I was at their mercy, but my case was not hopeless. I was armed."

"But your hands were not at your pistols. Velvet Foot saw by the light of the fire-ball that the men of Dead Line were the best prepared to shoot."

Ivan bit his lip.

"I will admit that," he said. "But why did you interfere? Men say that you are in league with Captain Clutch, and that demon hates all of us."

"The tongues of all men are not true," said the Indian. "If Ivan would believe a lie let him believe the white faces below the high trail."

"Clover Phil and his pards?"

"Yes, and Red Scar and his wounded liars."

"I will believe you!" cried the youth. "Last night I cursed you for I believed you to be Captain Clutch's pard. Some men have called you an Indian detective. I cannot say who or what you are. We can be friends. I hate the man from Taos, and the whole camp down there is against me. I shall ever be hunted like a wolf by two desperate men and their friends. But

I care not for that. As for myself, if I have shed the blood I think I have, better for me had I never seen the light of day, but before Heaven, Velvet Foot, I swear that I didn't mean to shoot when my rifle went off! See! I am armed only with my revolvers. I threw the accursed gun away. It has killed Princess Pet."

Despite his calmness the red-skin uttered a cry of horror.

He started from the rock and staggered toward Ivan, the exclamation still on his lips.

"Where—is—she?" he gasped.

"Would to Heaven I knew!" was the response. "She was Captain Clutch's prisoner when I fired, she was blindfolded, and the horse carried them both on."

Velvet Foot seemed to grow into a statue of stone while he confronted the youth.

What was Princess Pet that Ivan's words should shock him so?

"If Ivan has killed the white girl, he had better get beyond the hands of the Comanche!" he said with a terrible emphasis that thrilled the youth. "See! the bullet from Captain Theobald's revolver found Velvet Foot's vitals," and he threw back a dressed deerskin which passing over his right shoulder was secured at his belt on the left side.

Full of curiosity Ivan stepped forward and saw the track of the ball fired at close range, then he looked up into the Indian's tensely drawn visage and read vengeance and determination there.

"Great heavens! do you expect to live, shot as you are?" he cried.

"Ball go clear through Velvet Foot," was the reply, supplemented by a light laugh that sounded demoniacal to Ivan. "But the Comanche will hold his life back till he has reached the end of his trail."

"It will have to end very soon in my opinion," said Ivan, still inspecting the gaping wound aided by the now brilliant gleam of a heaven covered with stars. "If I had that shot, I'd be looking for a place to die."

"Ivan look round, mebbe, but Velvet Foot no think of dyin' yet," said the red. "The end of his trail is not here. It is far from Camp Vengeance, as the men of Dead Line have called their new home."

"Then you hate him cordially!" cried Ivan.

"When did your hatred begin?"

The question seemed a barbed shaft that went directly home.

Velvet Foot shrunk back a foot, and a quiver of aversion appeared to pass over his frame.

"No! Don't ask Velvet Foot when he began to hate Captain Clutch, the Taos Tiger!" he exclaimed. "Follow the Comanche and find out."

"I will! But you can't travel on foot, with that mark of the Tiger's teeth on your body."

"No; must have horses."

"Have you got them?"

The Comanche shook his head.

"I will get them," said the youth quickly. "I have one down there. I left him to come up here to find, I thought, Captain Clutch. It will be no harm to take a horse for our expedition from the corral belonging to Camp Vengeance. I will get you a horse."

"Be careful, boy," admonished the Indian. "The wolves of the camp will do more than growl if you stir them up; they will bite."

"Aha! don't I know the gang?" laughed Ivan, drawing back. "I know the traits of each individual Dead Liner, for I've studied them for years. Be here when I get back. Your trail is to end when we find the Taos Tiger! Good! We will find the mountain demon and I will help you to vengeance if that's what you want."

Concluding hurriedly, Ivan did not wait to hear any reply from the Comanche, but turned on his heel and bounded back over the trail he had traveled to Velvet Foot's halting-place.

For a few moments, or until he lost sight of him, the red detective gazed after Ivan, and all at once he threw both hands toward the stars and cried in tones that might have reached the youth's ears:

"He says I cannot live with the track of Captain Clutch's bullet through my body! I will make him out a liar in the face of the Great Spirit! I have found the waifs. I have tracked the man of many crimes to his last human hunting grounds! I have got all the enemies together. I will live to reach the end of my trail. Even if the lead of the Taos demon were in my heart, I would go on to the end! Men have called me the Indian Detective. Aha! they shall live to know that when I hunt I always find! This is the Comanche detective's last trail!"

Strange words for an Indian brave, but true ones.

He was on his last trail.

CHAPTER XII.

A SEVERED LASSO.

WE go back to the mountain camp, to the resort of the roughts of Dead Line whom we left directly after the shooting of the two by the Comanche from the cliffs above.

Clover Phil who thought he had saved several lives by extinguishing the fireball which had descended like a meteor into the camp, was disposed for the time to forget his quarrel with Red Scar Dave.

He believed that Captain Clutch had come back, and that his two pards had fallen by the Taos sport's revolvers.

When he turned to face Ivan again, behold! the boy was gone, and he saw only Red Scar in whose black eyes lurked a twinkle of satisfaction.

"I've hunted the Taos Tiger. Dare you do it, Clover Phil?" suddenly exclaimed the Dead Line bully. "I wouldn't let my pards go up thar because they're winged, as you see. Ef you want ter hunt him up, yonder he is waitin' for ye. But," he hind his teeth, "ef you ar' ther traitor ov Dead Line, I guess you'll not hunt Cap'n Theobald with yer finger at ther trigger."

"Yes! I'll hunt the Taos coward!" suddenly roared Clover Phil. "When I have flung his head inter Camp Vengeance, I will settle with the men who call me traitor."

"I'll be hyer when ye come back ef I'm not elsewhar," grinned Red Scar Dave. "Pick yer men and show yer grit."

Three minutes were sufficient for Clover Phil to select nine men from among his stalwart backers.

"I'll let Red Scar run ther camp awhile," he said, speaking in low tones to those whom he had elected to stay behind. "Give him a good deal of rope as long as he doesn't do any dirt, but when he gets out of his latitude, tighten on him."

They understood these words. They meant that in the event of certain movements on the part of Red Scar Dave, he was to be riddled with bullets.

Clover Phil left the camp with his nine men, and Red Scar went to his growling pards who were still swearing because they had not been permitted to go up the mountain and encounter the slayer.

The two factions did not intermingle.

They were twenty yards apart, and Red Scar found his pards still gripping the revolvers they had drawn with their left hands.

"Kin you chaps hold the fort till I get back?" was the question with which he startled the seven.

For a moment all gazed or rather stared into his face without a word.

"Ar' ye goin', too?" asked one at last.

"Yes."

"Arter Cap'n Clutch?"

"Partly an' partly on business ov my own. I'll be back hyer probably to-morrer, perhaps not for several days. Kin yer hold ther fort? Thet's what I want yer know."

"Ag'in' the pards thet faced us awhile ago?"

"Yes."

"Bet yer life we'll hold it, Red Scar. Thar'll be a pic-nic ef they don't carry themselves durned straight. We'll hold it, cap'n. You kin go."

There was in the voice and looks of the speaker an assurance that more than satisfied Red Scar Dave; it delighted him.

"I'll let 'em fight it out ef they want ter while I'm gone," he said as he walked from the little group with a farewell look. "Ef Clover Phil really expects to find Cap'n Clutch, he intends ter help him on ter vengeance. It's all plain to me. He left the sneaks behind an' took with him the pards who were most instrumental in wipin' out Pistol Pocket an' stirrin' up the tiger from Taos. It's a scheme. Ef Clover Phil expects ter find the cap'n he does not expect to bring one of them back to camp."

Red Scar Dave went to the corral over a roundabout way and approached it cautiously.

But all his caution resulted in nothing, for he found no one there, and in less than five minutes after reaching it he was mounted on one of the best young horses it contained, fully equipped for a fight and a ride, with an eager flash under his arching brows.

"Thar's goin' ter be suthin' did before I git back," he said to himself. "I'm not ther kind ov hair-pin what gives up a girl like Princess; not much! Though she gave us ther slip she's

whar Ivan came from when he set out for camp an' I'll find 'em both. Curse yer eyes! Ivan, I've hated ye since the hour the Injun boss fetched ye to Dead Line an' ther moment I saw ther girl, I looked at you an' said, 'She sha'n't be yours, boy! I'll see ter thet.' And I've got ter see ter it now."

The Dead Line bully seemed to know what trail Clover Phil and his nine pards had taken for he took another, riding leisurely along in the starlight with eyes on the alert, and with his revolvers where he could lay hands on them in a second.

The light breeze that stirred the foliage of the spectral trees that fringed the trail toyed gently with Red Scar's long black locks which touched his broad shoulders, and attempted to lift the wide brim of his dark sombrero.

The trail ascended gradually, and at the end of an hour Red Scar Dave found himself on a level bridle-path two hundred and fifty feet above the camp he had left behind.

"We'll go forward a little faster," he said in audible tones to the horse as he touched him lightly with the spur, sending him off into an easy gallop. "I've got an objective pint, an' we'll tap it first. Ef any man knows these mountains better nor Red Scar Dave, he's a daisy an' no mistake."

One by one the stars slipped down behind a certain peak, but the man from Dead Line did not draw rein.

He had descended into little valleys, mounted toward the peaks again, and found other trails level for a while and dimly lighted by the lanterns of the skies.

His "objective pint" seemed very far away, but then, the way he went, the rough, toilsome ascents, and the constant watchfulness called forth by his journey, made him move slower than he seemed to.

At last Red Scar Dave drew rein, and almost immediately afterward slid to the ground.

"Ef we don't strike a trail ov some kind hyer I'll be disappointed," he said. "Five years ago I war foolish enough to show Ivan a diskivry ov mine. We war trailin' the Durango boss-thieves, an' ther boy an' me found ourselves alone in this part ov ther nat'ral kingdom. An' I told 'im, too, thet I war ther only galeot thet knowed ov ther existence of ther cave. We went down ter it over my lasso, an' he pretended ter hev diskivered some writin' on ther walls, but I never took any stock in what he said. Only this I know, thet I war a fool. Mebbe not though," and the tough of Camp Vengeance suddenly brightened. "Hyers whar he'd be apt ter guide the girl, hyer ov all places would he come, thinkin' himself able ter defend it ag'in' Red Scar Dave."

The Colorado bully had walked to the edge of what appeared in the starlight to be a bottomless gulch.

He reached it at a spot where it was spanned by a fallen tree which formed an excellent bridge, and a gleam in his eager eyes told that he recognized the place.

It was miles from Dead Line, and having reached it by a somewhat circuitous route, Red Scar Dave had reasons for believing that he was the only person in the vicinity at that time.

Relinquishing the leathern bridle, the ruffian threw himself on the ground and leaned over the chasm as if he would pierce the darkness that hung beneath him.

"It war daytime when I showed Ivan the hidden cave, but I kin find it now. He's behind me, ov course; he war in camp to-night, an' I'll find Princess Pet alone. I'm a cute chicken when I take a notion ter make a liddle love. Oh, they can't git ahead ov ther boss rattler ov Dead Line!"

The last sentence ended in a light chuckle of satisfaction, and Red Scar Dave got up and uncoiled a stout black lasso which hung at the saddle-bow.

The horse seemed to watch his master's movements with a great deal of interest.

He saw Red Scar throw one end of the lasso over the tree and make it fast to the trunk, which was not large.

This did not occupy more than three minutes, when, with a glance at the horse, the Dead Liner seized the cord and let himself fearlessly from the log into the dangerous darkness of the narrow canyon.

"I've been hyer afore!" he ejaculated, as if some one had remonstrated against his venture. "This ain't ther first time I've swung myself over this log with only a knot an' a lasso 'twixt me an' eternity. Wait for me whar ye ar', Crockett. I've never failed ter come back sound ez a dollar."

There was a fixed noose in the lower end of the swaying rope, and Red Scar Dave slipped downward, hand over hand, eager and full of confidence.

He stood at last with one foot in the noose, and having recovered breath, began to swing himself toward the wall a few feet away.

His efforts increased the momentum, and an ejaculation of victory escaped him as his bronzed fingers touched the canyon wall, although he was the next moment forced back by the recoil.

But all at once a quiver came down the lasso, and its motion was checked with a suddenness that almost threw Red Scar Dave off, and caused him to look up.

His head was twenty feet from the log above, yet he could see that it had an incurance which was not there when he began his descent.

"Some men ar' born fools!" came down to him in a laugh that seemed to chill his very marrow. "Look out, my swingin' seraph ov the deep black eye! I hold ther best bowie in Colorado ag'in' the lasso!"

Red Scar Dave saw the speaker now.

He had barely made out his outlines up to this time, but now he saw the arm thrust downward, and he fancied he saw the devilish face, the gleaming eyes and the grinning teeth of an enemy who did not know what mercy was.

And he was helpless!

Not only helpless, but clinging to a bit of bullhide over a canyon whose bed was seven hundred feet below him!

"Can't you talk?" followed the last sentence of the man lying on the tree. "I haven't turned ye ter stone, hey I, Red Scar? Look out now! Some men call me Captain Clutch; but you an' yer pards know me as Captain Theobald, the avenger ov Pistol Pocket!"

Red Scar Dave ground his teeth.

"Yer name warn't necessary," through them he hissed. "I know ye, Cap'n Clutch!"

The answer was a laugh.

"It's a thousand feet ter yer landin'-place," said the Taos Tiger.

"Thet's a lie! it's only seven hundred."

"Count 'em ez ye go down, ha! ha! Let me inform ye thet the daisy ov Dead Line, fired by my torch, isn't in the cavern. All yer trouble has been for nothin'. She's alive an' well, though, an' when I have wiped out the banded pards ov Dead Line, I'll make her Captain Theobald's wife!"

The boast parted Red Scar's lips with a cry of madness.

It ended suddenly.

"Good-by, Red Scar! Take with yer the compliments of the Taos Tiger!" And the "best bowie in Colorado" cut the cord, and a yell went starward as a human form shot the darkness like a cannon ball!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TIGER AT HOME.

THE man with the bowie crept backward over the log to solid ground.

Beneath the bridge dangled a piece of lasso which swayed hither and thither in the night winds.

"One of the gang!" he ejaculated in audible tones. "I don't know but what I got away with the worst pill in the box. Thar war no rebound when you struck, Red Scar. When a man falls seven hundred feet through darkness an' strikes solid rock, he never lives to spin the yarn at a camp-fire."

Captain Clutch supplemented the last sentence with a laugh, and coolly put up the bowie as he turned away.

Red Scar's horse was no longer where the desperado of Dead Line had left him, but near by was another steed just as supple-limbed, and this horse seemed to be waiting for some one.

He pricked up his long fox-like ears as Captain Clutch came up and thrust his head forward, in greeting of the man who was his master.

Instead of vaulting into the saddle, the Taos Tiger stroked the horse's neck with one of his swarthy hands and walked down the trail, confident that the faithful steed would follow him.

Ten minutes later he drew aside a curtain of mountain vines that added much to the wild picturesque-ness of a certain place, and disappeared.

He was followed by the horse, for the opening thus displayed was large enough to admit a man in the saddle, and the curtain dropped behind the pair.

Captain Clutch was not a stranger in the place he had entered, and the horse also had been there before, for he stepped aside into a large dark niche and stood perfectly still while the man from Taos proceeded onward.

The mountain range of Southern Colorado can boast of wonderful caves as well as of wonderful canyons; caves still undiscovered there are large enough to conceal a regiment of soldiers, or a village of Indian braves.

It was not strange that Captain Clutch should know of the existence of at least one of these places.

He had not lurked among the mountains with his eyes shut, but had prepared for the final grapple with the men of Dead Line City.

As he glided down a narrow but lofty corridor, he was brought suddenly face to face in the light of a ground fire with a young girl from whose waist to the wall at her right extended a dark cord not unlike the one the desperado's bowie had severed a few minutes before.

Princess Pet!

The girl's eyes lit up with curiosity as Captain Clutch came forward.

She seemed to read in his appearance that something startling had happened, and her first thought was of danger to Ivan.

"The wolves are on the trail, Princess, but one has just left it by the lasso route," laughed the avenger of Pistol Pocket City as he halted before the speechless captive and coolly folded his arms.

"And that means, I suppose, that you have shed human blood," she said.

"I didn't spill a drop. I only cut a lasso, but that was a man at the end of it."

"A friend of mine?"

"That depends. He was a Dead Liner."

"It was Ivan!"

Captain Clutch made no reply, but stepped toward the girl as a frown darkened his face.

"Still thinkin' ov him, eh?" he almost hissed, and then he added as furiously as ever: "No, it was not that beardless pard, but I will get him by and by. I found a man tryin' ter reach a cave in the canyon wall. He was suspended in mid-air at the end of a lasso. They called him Red Scar at Dead Line!"

Princess Pet could not suppress an exclamation.

"Seven hundred feet through darkness ter strike the soft side of a rock—think ov it!" Captain Clutch went on. "One wolf less, an' ther worst one ov ther gang, I think. That galoot wanted you, Princess."

"He wanted Ivan's life worse."

"Wal, he'll not get either now. Two nights since when I rode inter Dead Line an' claimed ther letter addressed to the ugliest pard thar, I saw ther devil in his eyes just ez I saw him thar awhile ago. Thar warn't a man in ther hull town with sand enough ter claim ther letter, an' they warn't beauties either. I tried ter r'ile 'em when I sent it an' when I found I had hit on ther wrong plan so far as a fight was concerned, I came an' took it away."

"Did you send that letter?" cried the girl.

"I should gently remark, Princess," chuckled the man tiger from Taos.

"What did it contain?"

"Nothin' but a few choice epithets that would hev roused a sleepin' crocodile. But they wouldn't claim it. If I had sent it ter ther 'handsomest man in Dead Line' they'd hev fought for it. I hit 'em too hard. I made a mistake, but then I r'iled 'em a little later. Ther flames ov Dead Line waked 'em up."

The girl could hardly wait for Captain Clutch to conclude.

"Didn't Clover Phil the postmaster know that the letter was a scheme of yours?" she asked.

The question, entirely unexpected, startled the ruffian.

"How could he know, girl?" he cried.

"Ah! I know something!" was the answer and Pet's black eyes became riveted on the man before her.

"What do you know? Out with it!"

A mad stride and he was at her side, towering above her like a giant, and looking down upon her with a pair of blazing eyes.

She never quavered.

"What do I know?" she said calmly. "I know that you have had a traitor, a pard in Dead Line. I know that a man there has kept you posted. The letter which Red Scar Dave picked up in the trail near the bowlder post-office was written by that spy and afterward lost by yourself. I know that Ivan didn't write it, though Red Scar tried to fasten its authorship upon him. I know that there was only one other man with knowledge enough to pen it, and that man is Clover Phil."

By the time the girl reached her last sentence Captain Clutch had cooled down, and was waiting for her to close with the utmost sang froid.

"Wal, what ov it?" he said derisively. "What ef I had a pard in Dead Line? What ef men call him Clover Phil?"

The black eyes of the captive were seen to flash. "Then a meaner reptile than the postmaster of Dead Line never crept over the face of the earth!" she exclaimed.

The desperado laughed.

"Oh! is that your estimate ov my pard? I'll tell him when we meet."

"And tell him, too, that I hope his treason will go unrewarded, that the hatred of the waif of the Conestoga shall forever follow him, and that the vengeance of the betrayed will punish him one of these days!"

"Is that all, Princess Pet?"

The girl did not speak.

"You're rayther hard on Clover Phil," continued Captain Clutch. "See hyer. You talk about 'the vengeance ov the betrayed.' Thet'll never bother my Dead Line pard."

"Why not?"

"Because before ther end ov five days from this thar will be no betrayed."

"Do you think so?"

"I know it!" And the man-tiger stepped suddenly back and drew his magnificent brigandish figure to its full height. "The burnin' ov Dead Line war only ther commencement. At ther end ov ther fifth day the pards ov thet den will be food for ther Col-

orado vultures—not a livin' man will be left ter tell ther story ov ther end."

"None but your traitor, eh?"

"None but Clover Phil; I forgot him."

"If you are not careful, the spy may go down in the general wreck."

Captain Clutch's eyes exhibited a twinkle.

"I can spare him if he does," he smiled.

"You will have to spare him, then."

"What do you mean?"

"Wait and see."

"Tell me now!" demanded the Taos Tiger suddenly seizing the girl's arm. "Do you mean that you will turn on Clover Phil—that you will avenge the destruction ov Dead Line?"

"No. You have sworn vengeance on the pards of that mountain capital. There was a dweller there who was not a Dead Liner. He came to the place against his will. He—"

"Ivan you mean?" interrupted Captain Clutch.

The young girl's eyes said "I do."

"A boy ag'in' me an' Clover Phil!" broke forth the mountain ruffian, and his coarse laugh awoke the echoes of the cavern.

Princess Pet listened till her temples flushed and her cheeks burned.

"He laughs best who laughs last, Captain Clutch," she said. "A boy you call him, but in the end you shall find him a giant!"

All at once the laughter ceased, for the whinny of a horse had reached his ears.

With a glance at the girl, he suddenly deserted her and sprung toward the curtain of vines at the mouth of the underground retreat.

"Comet hears something," he said when he struck the gloom.

Three minutes later a human figure rose in his path and a hand found his wrist in the darkness.

"I've got nine ov 'em in a pen for you, cap'n," said a voice. "Ar' yer six shooters loaded?"

"Nine ov 'em?" he echoed. "Good!"

The informer was Clover Phil.

CHAPTER XIV.

TOWED BY A LIE.

THERE was no doubt of the postmaster's treason now.

He had brought the nine pards of Dead Line City to Captain Clutch, and had left them where the tiger of Taos could shoot them down without mercy.

Such an act was in keeping with Clover Phil's character, oily, treacherous and full of villainy.

Captain Clutch's hands moved quickly toward the weapons in his belt as he stepped forward and parted the curtain of vines that concealed from outside observation the entrance to the cave.

"Nine ov 'em," he was heard to repeat. "By Jove! Clover Phil, you ar' a pard worth havin'."

The Dead Liner's eyes glistened.

"When I swore ter help yer ter vengeance, captain, I meant every word ov my oath," he said. "I couldn't bring all ov 'em hyer. Thar war some who wouldn't hev followed me. But the ones I did bring ar' the worst whelps ov ther litter."

"Come on, then. Show me whar you hev left the victims!"

Side by side the two went up the mountain trail together.

Clover Phil had not drawn his revolvers, as though he intended to let the man-tiger do all the shooting.

He evidently thought he had done enough in bringing the nine pards to the man who had taken an oath to kill them all.

Besides, he (Clover Phil) had not promised to shed their blood; that belonged to Captain Clutch.

"Whar's the boy, Ivan?" asked the avenger as they walked along.

"I don't know. He was in camp when you threw the fireball down among us an' then dropped. Slim Silas an' Nugget Noll."

Captain Clutch stopped in his tracks and gave his companion a strange look.

"What fireball?" he asked.

"Didn't you throw one down inter camp while I war havin' a few words with Red Scar Dave?"

"No."

"Then I'd like ter know who did."

"He killed two men, eh?—two thet belonged ter me!"

"Shot 'em dead in their boots."

The Taos Tiger grated his teeth till they seemed to crack.

"Didn't you go up to see who did thet work, Clover?" he asked.

"I thought you did," was the reply. "Tharfore, I kept back. Ef it warn't you, captain, mebbe it war thet Injun's work."

"I settled him when—"

Captain Clutch broke his own sentence like a man who suddenly discovers that he is trespassing on the domains of a secret.

He was on the eve of telling Clover Phil that Princess Pet had fallen into his power, and this, perhaps, would not do.

"Never mind, Clover," he suddenly continued. "I will answer for that red-skin. He is not in shootin' condition just now."

"Then who shot the two pards in the light of the fireball?"

"Let time answer thet."

A few rods further on Clover Phil halted Captain Clutch by touching his sleeve and whispered at his ear:

"We're gettin' close to the corral, captain; this trail gives forth no sound, you perceive. Just beyond yon heap of rocks stand the nine pards from Camp Vengeance."

"For me!" hissed the ruffian from Taos. "Let

me go forward an' find 'em all. You forget, Clover Phil, that men say I hev an owl's eyes because I kin see so well after dark. I kin pick 'em all out at forty feet, an' I won't miss a galoot when I begin to kill!"

He started from his companion and Clover Phil watched him walk toward the bowlders a short distance forward.

"If they're all whar I left 'em he'll find some splendid targets," said the postmaster to himself as he glided after Captain Clutch.

Yes, resting on their horses in a little pen-like place surrounded by a natural barrier of rock, and where Clover Phil had left them a few minutes before, were the stalwart roughs of destroyed Dead Line.

Little did they dream that their leader and guide had brought them to that spot in order that the man he served could shoot them down in cold blood.

We will not say that their lawless deeds did not deserve some terrible vengeance, but to be shot by a man like the desperado gliding upon them through the starlight—that was no justice at all.

Catlike and with a pair of eyes in his head that flashed fire, Captain Clutch advanced step by step toward the rocks.

He did not glance over his shoulder to see what had become of Clover Phil; he seemed to have lost all interest in that individual.

When he halted he stood among the dense shadows thrown by the bowlders, and then he leaned forward until his breast touched the top of the pile.

The sight that met his gaze, although he had partially prepared himself for it, almost drew an exclamation over his lips.

He saw at first a confused lot of men and horses, but presently he was unable to separate them, and his lips moved inaudibly as he counted the gang.

"I can't see but eight an' yet Clover said he fetched nine hyer," he said to himself, and then, for fear of having made a mistake, he went over the lot again.

"Thar's but eight. Th r ninth one may 'e prowlin' around somewhar. I'll begin on what I have before me. To-night somebody will know thet I hev'n't forgotten the tragedy of Pistol Pocket!"

He thrust his revolvers over the rock and covered the two men nearest his position.

All unconscious of impending doom the pards of Dead Line faced the Taos Tiger.

When Clover Phil left them the company consisted of nine, now Captain Clutch could count but eight, and the absence of the one seemed to worry him not a little.

If at the moment he thrust his deadly six-shooters into the faces of his enemies, he had gone back several yards and looked at a certain spot, he might have seen the missing man; but such a thought never occurred to him.

Clover Phil was in his rear, and he ought to protect him from foes in that direction.

All at once the voice of the man-tiger sent a thrill through the frames of the Dead Line pards.

"Wake up an' die, dogs ov Dead Line!" rung c'early out on the mountain breeze. "You've ridden inter a pen ov death, an' Captain Theobald, the Destroyer, holds yer lives at the muzzles of his revolvers! I shoot for Pistol Pocket. To perdition with the hounds thet gave it to the match!"

The last sentence ended in a wild cry for revenge, and the next second the flashes of the captain's weapons showed his tigerish face, his glaring eyeballs to the thunderstruck pards of the Colorado hills.

"It is my night!" he yelled in their faces. "It is the doom of the Dead Line pards!"

The foremost desperadoes tumbled backward over the haunches of their steeds, and the whole band seemed to reel at once from the deadly shots fired over the rocks.

But suddenly a man threw himself upon the Taos Tiger from behind—a man the captain's equal in physique, courage and ferocity.

Captain Clutch felt his arms torn from their resting-place on the natural breastwork, and suddenly pinioned at his sides.

He started back to combat his new foe, but just then he was dealt a blow that seemed to knock his head from his shoulders.

"I guess we'll turn the tables, cap'n," said a voice at his ear, as his senses swam. "I'm one ov ther pards ov Dead Line—"

"The ninth man!" flashed through the captain's mind as he interrupted the speaker with an oath.

"Bowlder Bill, the galoot who fired Pistol Pocket the night we cleaned it out! An' now, cap'n, we'll see thet you shoot no more Dead Line pards arter to-night. I've got the boss tiger ov the menagerie, boys!" cried the captain's captor, elevating his voice; and with yells, oaths and frantic cries of mad delight, the toughs of Dead Line sprung from their steeds and began to clamber over the stones.

In another instant the Taos Tiger found himself in the center of the maddest lot of men he had ever faced.

Behind the rocks in the "pen," to which the traitor of Dead Line had guided them, lay three stiffened human figures, each with a bullet-hole between the eyes.

"Wal," growled Captain Clutch, facing the bronzed crowd with the air of an unconquered desperado, "you've corraled me, dogs of Dead Line. Ha! you know me. I'm Captain Theobald, the kingpin ov Pistol Pocket, the twin brother ov the man you hung thet night!"

"Glad ov it, cap'n!" was the fierce response.

"We'll sarve you the same trick."

"When?"

"Right away! Tie his hands, pards. Thar's a tree somewhar nigh, thet spans the canyon. We'll let

him hang under it five minutes, an' then shoot the rope in two!"

Captain Clutch did not start at this merciless announcement of his doom.

He must have thought of the piece of lasso dangling at that moment from the tree-bridge, and of the man he had sent headlong to death down the darkened canyon.

"Tie me, hang me!" he hissed. "Shoot off the rope an' send Captain Theobald spinnin' through the seven hundred feet of space below that tree, but know that it will only hasten yer ends."

"Ho! ho! who's goin' ter avenge yer, cap'n?" laughed the Dead Liners.

"Live an' see!"

"By George! we'll run the risk!" exclaimed Bowlder Bill, and seeing that the operation of tying the prisoner's hands was complete, he gave the order to march to the tree.

"Mebbe, cap'n," suddenly said one of the gang, "mebbe you expect yer Injun pard ter avenge you. If you do, let me say that we'll take care of Velvet Foot, the Comanche. Dead Line gains a final victory over Pistol Pocket to-night. Halt! hyer's ther tree. Toss yer lasso round it, Bowlder Bill."

"Thar's a rope thar already."

"But it's a cut rope," parted Captain Clutch's lips. "I cut it an hour ago, an' sent Red Scar Dave headlong down the canyon."

These words were greeted with ejaculations of astonishment.

"It's ther only service you ever did Dead Line, cap'n," said Bowlder Bill. "But it won't save you."

"All right," nonchalantly answered the Taos Tiger. "Send me after Red Scar Dave, an' twenty-four hours will see the end of every mother's son of you!"

Bowlder Bill and his pards looked strangely at one another.

Was it a threat backed by power to stay? or the last stroke of a desperate man for life?

"Why don't you go on with yer circus?" laughed the ruffian captain. "You stand there an' look at one another like a parcel of cowards. I've only told ther truth. Twenty-four hours is ther limit if I foller Red Scar Dave."

A moment later the knife of Bowlder Bill cut the captain's cords.

"Go an' wipe out Dead Line ef yer kin. We give you another chance!" cried the deliverer. "Part an' l-t the boss animile of the menagerie out, pards."

Though taken aback by their leader's action, the Dead Line pards stepped aside and sullenly let the Taos Tiger through.

He uttered no word of thanks, gave them no look of gratitude, but clinched his hands and dashed madly up the mountain trail.

"I scared 'em with a lie!" he laughed.

CHAPTER XV.

TIGERS RED AND WHITE.

If Captain Clutch had obtained his deliverance by means of a futile threat whose success was a source of surprise to him, a still greater one awaited him.

In his eagerness to gain the mountain cavern which he had left a short time before in company with Clover Phil, he looked neither to the right nor to the left for his friend.

Dashing the vines aside he bounded into the darkened corridor, and pressed forward toward the main apartment.

He landed in the apartment suddenly, and then awoke its echoes with a terrible malediction.

The cave was empty!

No longer stood before him the beautiful young creature whom he left at the end of a lasso which the strength of a giant could not snap.

What had become of Princess Pet?

On the cavern floor lay a severed lasso, and the Taos Tiger snatched it up and examined it closely.

"Cut with a knife!" he grated. "By heavens! some one has been hyer. The girl herself could get no bowie. There was none in the den for her. Who has been hyer?"

The echo of his demand came back like a bitter derisive laugh which only increased his rage.

All at once the truth flashed across his brain.

"I know the thief!" he cried. "Clover Phil, the girl's beauty has got away with you! I made you a traitor to your kind, an' you've paid me back by turnin' kidnapper! Stand out of my way! I've been Captain Clutch to you all along; from this hour I am Captain Vengeance."

He went back to the corridor, and at the mouth of the cave made another discovery.

His horse was missing.

Another oath, and he sprung into the starlight with a cocked six-shooter in his hand.

"To hunt you down first is my duty, Clover Phil!" fell from his lips. "After that I will make the pards of ruined Dead Line wish they had never seen the light of day! I don't give a prize like Princess Pet up without a terrible fight."

He went down the trail as if he was going back to the spot where he had met and fought the Dead Line pards; but he halted soon, and after a moment of self consultation turned aside into a bridle-path and disappeared.

"He'll take her back to camp, won't he?" he said to himself. "The pards don't suspicion him, else they wouldn't hev follered him hyer. Thar's whar I'll find Princess Pet, an' thar, by Heaven! is whar I'll begin ter kill!"

Daylight was lighting the eastern horizon when a man, majestic in physical appearance, appeared on the spur of a mountain which overlooked the camp of the Dead Line pards.

Although there were plainly visible evidences that he had traveled afoot over rough ways the greater part of the night, he still looked fresh, and the eagle eyes that shone in his head gazed searchingly down the mountain.

He saw the little camp that lay hundreds of feet beneath his lofty position, too far below him to distinguish its tenants with the naked eye; but he knew that it must contain the men he hated, for he was Captain Clutch, they the pards of Dead Line.

"Look out, the eagle is hyer!" he exclaimed. "Over yonder lie the black ruins of yer town, an' when I leave Camp Vengeance, as you call your new nest, it will be in no better condition."

He stepped back, looked carefully to the heavy revolvers that lifted their heads above his belt, and then went down the winding trail.

The descent could not be accomplished in a few minutes; it was the work of an hour, and when, at the end of that period of time, Captain Clutch stood on a level with the camp of the burned-out Dead Liners, the sun had risen far above the eastern rim and was mounting zenithward through a cloudless sky.

Step by step Captain Clutch crept down the rugged gorge at whose mouth the Dead Line pards had taken up their abode.

He hugged the wall that was in shadow, and all the time kept his fingers at the triggers of his weapons while his glances shot ahead for a sight of the men he hated.

When he halted it was to straighten his figure and to crane his neck forward.

He was at the edge of Camp Vengeance.

He saw the few things the Dead Liners had saved from the flames but no human figure met his gaze.

"Blamed ef the old place isn't as silent as a sepulcher," murmured Captain Clutch. "Something's happened hyer, too. Mebbe the birds hev taken wings an' left the kentry."

In no good humor he advanced again a few steps, and suddenly discovered the cause of the stillness.

The camp was not entirely deserted although he was the only living tenant.

The figures of four men lay on the ground, and the right hand of each was bandaged.

Captain Clutch's eyes glittered while he regarded them.

"They're the chaps I winged," he ejaculated. "The pards of Dead Line have disagreed among themselves. Thar lie four galoots I will never get ter settle with, but I will settle with the pistols ther wiped them out. I'm too late. I stand in Camp Vengeance, but it holds only four men an' their toes ar' turned skyward. Clover Phil might hev fetched the girl hyer, but he isn't hyer now."

The pause of the Taos Tiger was abrupt.

It galled him to think that he had reached Dead Liner's camp to find it tenanted only by the dead.

"I'll let somebody know I've been hyer," he said. "Though I didn't drop the four pards, I'll write my autograph across their faces, so thet when their friends come back they'll know that Colorado still contains the boss tiger of the cage!"

He whipped out a ten-inch bowie and walked to where the dead men lay in the positions in which they had tumbled when struck by the deadly bullets of the border.

"I'll just leave my mark with ye, boys," he laughed, and quick as a flash he drew the keen point of the bowie across the face of the one nearest him. "Thar! Yer mother wouldn't know you!" And he stepped back and contemplated his work with a grin.

Again he stooped and gashed the fixed features of the second Dead Liner, but ere he could repeat the insult on the face of the third, a yell that made the gorge resound sounded in his ear and a well thrown lasso dropped over his head!

It was the work of a second for Captain Clutch to leap up from his employment with a yell of rage.

"Lassoed, but not for keeps!" he roared. "Nobody holds the Taos Tiger with a rope," and in the flight of a second his yellow hands tore off the noose even before it tightened, and the next moment he thrust forward the deadliest revolvers in Colorado.

The lassoer was completely taken aback.

He stood not more than thirty feet from Captain Clutch, amazed at the man-tiger's agility.

"Confound you! I thought I had finished you!" growled the desperado. "How often must an injun be shot before he tosses in his checks? But I've got you now, Comanche. You've trailed me a long time an' I've put up with it because I didn't want ter dirty my hands with you. Now I'll shoot to kill."

He went forward in a quick bound as he shot out the last sentence, but all at once the red-skin reeled away with a wild cry and fell before Captain Clutch could press the trigger.

"What does thet mean?" queried the Taos Tiger. "It may be a fortunate stroke of apoplexy for yer, Velvet Foot. If you're foolin' me, woe to the day thet brought ye into the world!"

Three strides took him to the spot where the Indian detective had fallen.

"Dead! by Jove!" exclaimed the Taos Tiger, looking down into the face of the Comanche. "I finished him after all when I shot, but he held out till he had lassoed me, an' his failure snapped the thread of life."

Still, to fully satisfy himself he stooped and put his left hand on the Indian's breast.

"I war right. The Comanche dog is dead!"

Dead?—no; a cool man's trick.

All at once the body of the red-skin seemed to leap up at the ruffian avenger, a pair of long red arms went round his neck, and before the man-tiger could comprehend the sudden change, he was drawn downward into the clutches of his Indian tracker!

In vain he struggled.

A hand caught at his throat and as the fingers seemed to meet behind his windpipe, a voice hissed in his ear:

"Velvet Foot is at the end of his trail!"

CHAPTER XVI.

IVAN'S NEW ALLY.

THE sun reached the meridian and sloped toward the west, the shadows of the mountain peaks lengthened once more, and the winds that stir as the day wanes moved the boughs of bush and tree.

"What's the use of waiting longer for him?" said a young man who sat on the back of a horse on a trail walled with masses of dark-gray stone. "He has died somewhere, therefore he will not come back. I knew that the Indian detective could not recover from the wound he carried in his breast, that it was sapping his life and that despite his assertion that he would live till he had found Captain Clutch, he would die suddenly, and without a sign. I have waited long enough for him. He started out to find Pet's trail. He has left me. I must find it myself."

These words of course fell from Ivan's lips.

The young Mazeppa of Colorado was a long distance from Camp Vengeance, and he did not think that Velvet Foot the Comanche had traveled back to the spot.

"Yes, I will find the girl alone and unaided," he went on in determined tones. "I will never ask the Indian to assist me. And I trust that I may find the Taos Tiger also."

He urged his steed into a gallop and left the spot, but ten minutes later he guided him quickly to one side of the trail and drew a revolver as he leaned forward and held his breath.

"We've lost Clover Phil, but what of thet?" laughed a coarse voice which Ivan seemed to recognize, for at sound of it he started.

"We'll git another ef we need one," was the quick answer. "We war fools for lettin' up on Cap'n Theobald when we had 'im in our clutches. He'll turn on us for it, an' open his shootin' batteries with killin' effect."

"Let 'im try!" growled a third party just as seven or eight swarthy horsemen came in sight. "I took upon myself the responsibility of settin' the boss tiger at liberty. I want ter find out who his pards ar'."

"If we hed hanged him first, Bowlder Bill—"

"Hanged thunder!" was the interruption, and the speaker drew rein suddenly and turned upon the growling dissatisfied crowd at his back. "If you don't like what I did say so, an' we'll separate. Spit it out!"

"We don't like it; thar!"

"Thet's bizness. Now ride on. We've dissolved partnership. Go back ter Camp Vengeance er hunt Captain Clutch an' get yer fill of him, just as you like. I've had enough of this kentry, anyhow. Thar's a bonanza somewhar for Bowlder Bill, ov Dead Line City, an' he hunts for it from this hour."

The long arm of the Colorado rough pointed toward distant Camp Vengeance, and a firm resolve to part from his companions settled in his eyes.

The tongs of the mountain looked at one another, but did not speak.

"Go!" thundered Bowlder Bill. "We've been long enough together anyhow. I will be no men's leader ef I can't do as I please. Go back ter yer bonanzas if you have any. I'll go to mine!"

"By thunder! go we will," growled one of the gang. "Good-by, Bowlder Bill."

The forward rough made no response, and his arm still outstretched did not drop at his side until the last Dead Liner had ridden by.

Ivan unseen among the bushes at the side of the trail witnessed this parting.

Curiosity filled his heart.

Those men had had Captain Clutch in their power and Bowlder Bill had rescued him.

"He must tell me about the Taos Tiger," said Ivan to himself. "He may know something about Princess Pet. I know him well. We were never enemies although, during my long stay in Dead Line City, we never became friends."

The next instant the voice of the youth made Bowlder Bill turn his head, and an exclamation of astonishment parted his lips.

Ivan urged his steed upon the trail, and before he spoke again he was in arm's reach of the Dead Liner.

"Where is Captain Theobald?" he asked.

"Do you want him real bad?" And a smile flitted across the desperado's face.

"I am hunting him."

"To give him the dead drop on ye?"

"I'll risk that. Tell me where you left the Taos Tiger. I know that you had him in your power, but I do not know why you let him go. I don't want him particularly to shed his blood. I am on the trail of a dear friend."

"The girl, eh?"

"Princess Pet."

The eyes of Bowlder Bill seemed to twinkle with eagerness. "Do you know, Ivan, that you've got a bad rival?" he said.

"Who?"

"Couldn't you guess?"

"Red Scar Dave?"

The Dead Liner laughed. "No man is a dangerous rival who falls seven hundred feet through unfiltered starlight," he said. "I mean Clover Phil."

"I know that, but I'm not afraid of the outcome if Pet has to choose between he and I. Where is Clover Phil?"

"Ha! got on thet trail hev ye?" grinned Bowlder Bill. "A minute ago ye war inquiren' arter Cap'n Theobald, now it's Clover Phil. He left us last night ter reconnoiter an' thet's the last we've seen of him."

Ten minutes arter he left us Cap'n Theobald came an' opened on the boys. Warn't it singular?"

"No," answered the youth. "It was according to the programme. Clover Phil is the traitor of Dead Line."

Bowler Bill did not start as the youth expected he would, his countenance did not change.

"I thought you would think it singular," he merely said. "It didn't take me by surprise. If I warn't goin' off ter look up the bonanza I've got somewhar, I'd take a turn arter Clover Phil. But you want Captain Clutch, don't you, Ivan?"

"Yes."

"For what?"

"I left Pet with him."

"The deuce you did!" ejaculated Bowlder Bill. "Thet puts another face on the matter. We've never been great friends, hev we, Ivan?"

"No."

"I always looked upon you as a curse ter Dead Line. Arter thet Injun hoss brought yer inter camp, we begun ter hev bad luck. I used ter think thet you brought it ter Dead Line, an' more'n half ov ther boys got ov ther same opinion. We couldn't hev become pards; it warn't in the nature ov things."

"All right," laughed Ivan. "If there can be no love between us, I will do nothing to stir up hatred. I've had enemies enough in my time. I want no more. Let me find Princess Pet alive, and I will turn my face forever from the mountain camps of Colorado."

"What do you know about thet girl, boy?"

Bowler Bill leaned forward with eagerness depicted on his countenance as he put the question.

"She war found in a Conestoga whose hosses an' driver had been arrered by the Comanches," he went on. "I used ter look at her an' imagine that she resembled a sister I hed when I war a boy. But she didn't recollect her mother's name, though I asked her a thousand times."

"But I know what it was," said Ivan. "I have not lived in Dead Line for nothing. I have discovered Pet's mother. Her father was killed when the Indians chased the wagon, but the horses got away with it afterward, to drop dead from arrow wounds, and the girl was left to her fate. I have corresponded with the mother. I used to write letters to her and put them under the big bowlder near Dead Line, where they would be found by a secret agent in her employ. I did not know for a long time that Clover Phil was using that same bowlder—the other side of it—to communicate with Captain Clutch."

"But what war Pet's mother's maiden name?" asked Bowlder Bill. "You see you've made me just ther least bit anxious. It's no secret now, I suppose."

"No, though I've kept it diligently from Princess Pet for a purpose which might appear selfish. I wanted to gain her love first—"

"But the name!"

"It is Manderson."

The rough of Dead Line started back with an ejaculation.

"Alice Manderson, my favorite sister!" he exclaimed, and then darting forward his hand closed on Ivan's arm. "You wouldn't lie to Bowlder Bill on such a subject as this! no, no! Princess Pet is Alice's child! Hooray! The bonanza can go to thunder for the time bein'! Hyer! turn yer hoss's head about. Ef you brought bad luck ter Dead Line you've more'n made up for it by tellin' me who ther waif ov ther Conestoga is! About face, I say. If Princess Pet is in Cap'n Theobald's grip we'll wrench her away, an' Clover Phil, ther traitor, will never win the game he's been playin'! Hooray! I feel like a mornin' star! Bowlder Bill will make a red trail over these everlasting hills ef anybody opposes his hunt!"

Ivan could not but stare at the excited man.

"I had Velvet Foot with me on the trail, but he left me suddenly," he said.

"Thet Injun? He's been called a red detective. Do you know why, Ivan?"

"Not exactly. He hates Captain Clutch; he has trailed him for years for a purpose, I know not what. But Velvet foot is dead. The captain's bullet has done its work ere this."

"Then let us find the girl. We can be friends now. I feel like a mornin' star, I say. An' Alice is alive! Hooray!" And up went Bowlder Bill's sombrero toward the sky.

The next second the mountain echoes were again awakened by the ringing report of a fire-arm and the hat dropped over the Dead Liner's hand pierced by a bullet!

"Fancy shootin' by a fool, Ivan! Look at thet!" cried Bowlder Bill holding up the perforated sombrero to the astonished youth's gaze. "Thet means, I calkerlate, that I may be thankful thet my head warn't inside."

He put the hat on as he concluded, and coolly turned toward that part of the mountain from whence the bullet had come.

He seemed to know who had fired the shot, but he said nothing.

"They think they kin win with the hand they hold," he sent back over his shoulder to Ivan "who was close behind. 'The pards hev gone back ter Camp Vengeance ter fight like wolves among themselves. They had it rough-and-tumble thar last night and four died with their boots on. 'Toller me close, Ivan. I never waste powder shootin' tossed-up hats. Pet is Alice's child. Hooray!"

The mountain sent back in echoes Bowlder Bill's loud shout.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE END OF IT ALL.

At the close of a previous chapter we left the reader in the belief that Princess Pet, the waif of

the Conestoga had changed masters, that is that she had fallen into the power of a new admirer.

This was true, and Captain Clutch hit the mark when he guessed that Clover Phil his pard and traitor had visited the cavern in the mountain-side, and stripped it of its beautiful tenant.

But Clover Phil had not gone back to Camp Vengeance.

He was too shrewd to take the girl back to the place he had betrayed, too cunning to return to the pards of Dead Line, where he was liable to be treated as the Taos Tiger's spy.

He knew that Red Scar Dave, his formidable rival, had perished at the instance of Captain Clutch, but there still remained one who was likely to give him serious trouble before he could call himself the permanent victor.

It was the existence of Ivan that irritated Clover Phil.

While he lived, Princess Pet would be searched for, and the young Mazeppa was likely to give him a good deal of trouble.

One hour after the sending of the bullet through Bowlder Bill's sombrero, a man raised himself in his stirrups and cocked two heavy revolvers which he carried at his side.

The sun had just gone down on another eventful day, but darkness had not yet followed the descent, and the man on the horse could see some distance ahead.

"I heard a horse an' no mistake," he said to himself. "It was comin' this way a moment ago. Thar it goes ag'in! Now, when it comes round yon bend in the trail, I'll nake his rider throw up his hands quicker'n he kin say 'Jack Robinson.'"

He raised the revolvers, covered a certain spot, and waited on.

All at once a horse came into view and the next moment the stern "Halt! hands up!" rung out distinctly.

"Hands up, yerself!" was the unexpected response from behind the person halted. "I've got the drop on ye, Clover Phil. Drop yer shooters an' toss up yer hands. An' be thunderin' spry about it!"

The answer was a pistol-shot by the man who had issued the first command, and the foremost of the two horsemen reeled, but kept his saddle.

"This is no hat-shootin' circus!" exclaimed a loud voice, and at the crack of the next revolver Clover Phil dropped one weapon, clutched the lines, and turning his steed's head, drove the spurs deep into his flanks.

"I'll capture the Dead Line traitor, Ivan!" And away went the speaker past the youth whose face had suddenly grown white as he clung to his seat in the saddle.

In a minute the two men disappeared, and Ivan heard their horses' hoofs in the gathering dusk.

"We found Clover Phil where we least expected, to," he said. "He was alone. If he has captured Princess Pet he must have left her somewhere. Let me see. Is there a cavern near by?"

The youth moved his hand across his forehead as if to collect his thought.

He knew the mountains that surrounded him, his frequent excursions from Dead Line had familiarized him with them, and there were few celebrated places he did not know.

But now he could think of none, though he racked his brain till the labor brought on a pain.

Suddenly there rung out on the air behind him a shot and then a wild cry, like a woman's shriek for assistance.

"It is Princess Pet!" he cried wheeling about, and just in time to see a frantic horse dash in sight, followed by another from whose saddle a man leaned with hand outstretched.

Ivan saw in a moment that there was to be a collision.

The foremost horse which carried a young girl was almost upon him, and the second was not twenty feet behind.

The trail was narrow and walled by steep rocks, so that Ivan had not room to turn aside and let the flying horses pass.

He ground his teeth as his eyes flashed.

"I'll end it all right here," he said.

The words had scarcely left his lips ere crash! the horses came together; and the fair rider, who went over the head of one, landed in Ivan's arms as he was forced from his own saddle.

He struck the solid earth half-stunned by the shock, and staggered against the rocky wall.

"You alive yet?" hissed the waif's pursuer, who had barely missed the collision by good horsemanship. "Stand where you ar', and drop the beauty ov the mountains!"

Ivan's response was a defiant look, and his right arm tightened around the girl's waist.

"Look inter thet an' take a minute for your decision!" And the revolver thrust forward by the desperado covered the youth's head.

"I give Princess Pet up to no traitor!" was the fearless answer. "Clover Phil, you can't have the old Conestoga's waif!"

"Can't, eh? I'll whisper three for you, Ivan. At the sound of the last number, if she isn't where I can reach her, I'll paint the gorge's wall with your brains!"

"Count till you're out of breath! You sha'n't have the girl. I'll kill her first!"

"You will? I guess not, my young wolf. Now make up yer mind; I mean business. Off I go. One—two—three! Shall she be mine?"

Ivan drew closer to the wall.

"No!" he cried.

Clover Phil's brow darkened and his eyes snapped with new rage.

"Then, by Heavens, I'll loosen your grip with the pistol!" was the hissed rejoinder.

In another second there came a ringing shot,

but it was not the postmaster's revolver which had spoken.

Ivan saw Clover Phil's horse bound from under him; he saw, too, the Tiger's pard throw up his dark-brown hands, and he fell to the ground and lay quivering where Pet's feet touched the trail.

All this in a second of time.

The young Mazeppa turned his head to see his deliverer, and to hear a voice he had heard before.

"Hooray! This is what I call the nick of time!" exclaimed the individual who rushed forward and without the least ceremony snatched the half-senseless girl from Ivan's arms, and held her at arm's length. "It's worth ten years ov life ter hold Alice's child in my arms!" he went on. "I always said she looked like my pet sister, but she couldn't tell me anything. Thet galoot thar hed ther drop on yer, eh, Ivan?" and Bowlder Bill spurned Clover Phil's corpse with his boot. "He nearly got away from me arter all. Took a short turn on me an' came back hyer an' picked the girl up. Somehow or other she gave him the slip an' he shot arter her, ter scare her, I guess. He didn't know thet I war comin' up behind. Wal, isn't she a beauty? She's got Alice's eyes an' hair. She's the Jim dandiest critter in Colorado. Hooray!"

Ivan saw Princess Pet recover to shrink from the swarthy tough of Dead Line.

She had seen him a thousand times, but now she could not believe him a friend, much less look upon him as a relative.

But a few words from Ivan's lips told all, and she held out her hand and thanked Bowlder Bill for the deliverance.

"I'd like ter know why thet Comanche hunted Cap'n Clutch," remarked the tough. "You say he deserted you last night?"

"Yes. He must have died somewhere. He carried a terrible wound in his breast."

"I've known Injunster hev as many lives as cats," said Bowlder Bill. "Let's take the back trail an' hunt Velvet Foot up. We'll find him somewhar."

"I'm with you," replied the youth. "I, too, want his secret."

Again the sun had risen and was making his way toward the meridian when Bowlder Bill and Ivan, whose wound was slight and did not trouble him, rode into the gorge that received the Dead Liners after the destruction of their mountain "city."

The stillness of death hovered above the place, and the two men, glancing skyward, saw dark objects moving under the cerulean canopy.

Well did they know that the Colorado vultures were hovering over a feast of some kind.

Pressing onward, with ready fingers at easy triggers, they entered Camp Vengeance.

It had rained the night before, and water stood here and there in little pools.

The camp was apparently deserted, as if the mountain pards had taken up their march for other places; not one was there to welcome the two trailers.

But all at once they came upon two human figures locked in one another's embraces.

They were dead.

"Captain Clutch!" cried Ivan, springing back from the glassy stare of a pair of eyes that confronted him.

"Velvet Foot!" exclaimed Bowlder Bill. "But look at that Injun's face. It is half white, Ivan—"

The boy uttered another ejaculation of surprise and then stooped trembling over the dead men.

"Great heavens! Velvet Foot was a white man!" he said, looking up into Bowlder Bill's face. "He played the Indian to perfection. I would have sworn that he was a true Comanche, but he has deceived us all. His secret has perished with him, but his trail ended where he found Captain Clutch."

"Mebbe his secret kin be found for all," said Bill. "Rip open his belt to begin with."

Ivan went to work with his knife and brought to view a folded piece of paper which had nestled many years where it was found.

"Thet's ther secret," said Bowlder Bill.

Ivan said nothing, but quietly unfolded the paper and began to master its contents.

When he had done so thoroughly, he turned and fixed his eyes on the red detective, and then knelt beside the body.

"He's found somebody that knew him," whispered Bowlder Bill to himself.

When the youth rose, he began to make preparations for burying Velvet Foot, and half an hour later he turned from a mountain grave with a sigh.

"You needn't tell me who Velvet Foot was," said Bowlder Bill. "I know."

And the youth looked up into the sport's face and answered:

"Yes; he was my father."

A week later, Bowlder Bill read the paper found in the belt for himself.

Then he knew that Velvet Foot was a white man who had cause to hate the Taos Tiger; that Captain Clutch had robbed him of a son; that he had caused that boy to become a young Mazeppa; that he had personated a brave of the Comanche nation and followed the man-tiger from trail to trail to find Ivan at last, and to reach the end of his hunt at the desperado's throat.

Not long after the ghastly discovery in Camp Vengeance, Princess Pet was restored to her mother, and Bowlder Bill having tarried awhile with his new-found sister, set out in search of the bonanza, which he averred was "somewhar."

The mountain pards who escaped Captain Clutch's vengeance never rebuilt Dead Line, but sought new quarters and played other red dramas, while Ivan and Princess Pet, as man and wife, took up their abode in Denver.

THE END.

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